



THOSE
WHO
CHERISH

Jamie
Craig

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...“If you believe that I’ll judge you, or that I’ll think less of you, then there’s nothing more I can do about that.” Alonzo turned from the window and crossed to the fire.

Ben didn’t follow. He chose instead to start wandering around the room again, much as he had done that morning while Alonzo prepared breakfast. It gave Alonzo the opportunity to watch him, the play of the shadows against the sculpted muscles. Ben belonged outside, on his land, not cooped up in a tiny presidio. He would not last much longer behind these walls.

“I’m not like most of the men I know,” Ben said. “I don’t usually care too much about that. But you...somehow, you are different.”

“Different how?”

His shrug could have been slight because of his reluctance to answer, or the injuries on his back. Alonzo wasn’t sure which.

“You cut me down from that tree without even asking what I’d done to deserve it in the first place. That says a lot about a man.”

“So why don’t you trust me?”

He posed the question as Ben passed nearby. He didn’t expect Ben to stop and come back, to crouch down in front of him and fold his hand over Alonzo’s on the poker. Gently, he guided the tool back to its place on the hearth, pulling

Alonzo's hand off before letting him go.

"Tell me if you still wish the truth when I do this." Ben cupped Alonzo's face and drew him nearer, tilting his head to press their mouths together in a soft kiss.

Alonzo froze, stunned by the pressure and texture of Ben's mouth against his. His heart didn't beat. His lungs didn't expand. He didn't close his eyes. He didn't pull away, either...

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BY

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THOSE WHO CHERISH
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CHAPTER 1

Silence was Father Alonzo's constant companion. Once, it had been an enemy. A constant reminder of the burden of solitude. But now, silence was almost a friend. It assured him there were no thunderstorms, growing and gathering over distant mountains. The silence told him he still had time to make it back to the presidio before getting caught in a storm that could reach monsoon levels. But he still kept an eye on the horizon, searching for any warning signs while he scanned the ground for certain medicinal plants. Despite the reassuring silence, there was an ominous weight in the air. Heat pushed down on his covered head, and sweat rolled down his brow and into his eyes.

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Alonzo straightened and wiped his arm across his forehead. His donkey, Angelica, sighed and rooted at the ground between her feet. He patted her neck affectionately, watching as strands of grass bent beneath her teeth. The bag over her haunches was already mostly full with herbs, bulbs, and flowers. He had had a good day, and there was no reason to stay in the overbearing sun when the donkey wanted to rest and he wanted a bit of wine.

“Should we go home?”

Angelica didn't respond.

He picked up her lead rope, but he didn't turn back to the presidio. She trudged along behind him obediently, his other constant companion. Her hooves clopped behind him, hitting the ground in a steady beat. Besides the occasional shout of a hawk, that was the only sound for miles around. Alonzo could go weeks without seeing another soul, days without seeing evidence that other people lived in the area. It was frustrating, to say the least. He hadn't become a priest to live in utter isolation with a donkey and a Bible, but the men at Fort Davis rarely sent for him, and the heathen Indians would kill him on sight if he visited their villages. The nearest town was over thirty miles away, and they were closer to El Paso than to him.

It was utterly unnecessary to stay in the presidio, but he had his orders. And so he made the most of them and prayed God would deliver him from the torment and send him where he could do some good for somebody. But God had not seen fit to answer his prayers, and so Alonzo had no choice but to accept that he did not fully understand God's plan for him. He

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never questioned that God did, in fact, have a plan. But in dark nights, when his soul called out for relief, he longed to know what he had done to be punished in this way.

“We’ll have a good dinner tonight, Angelica. And tomorrow, we’ll thank God for the bounty and spend the day in reflection and prayer.”

Angelica snorted, but otherwise, didn’t acknowledge him. Sometimes, he thought he should take a trip into the mountains. But it was too dangerous. The men at Fort Davis already thought he was insane for staying at the presidio, despite the obvious danger. They warned him that when the Indians raided the presidio, he would be left without a scalp—and if he were lucky, that’s all they would do to him. But he had faith that God would not call him to his final reward prematurely. Despite his faith, he didn’t take unnecessary risks, like journeying into the mountains on his own.

A screech drew his gaze heavenward, and he narrowed his eyes against the glare of the sun. Black dots against the washed out blue sky caught his attention, and soon he realized they weren’t hawks. They were vultures. Circling something Alonzo couldn’t see. It was probably just some animal’s carcass. Only...vultures didn’t circle remains. They were waiting for something to give up the ghost.

Alonzo hoisted himself onto Angelica’s back and kicked her into a trot. The chances were good that he was racing to a dying animal, but something moved deep inside of him. He did not question that feeling—the feeling he identified as God’s voice. He needed to be receptive at all times to the

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Spirit, even if sometimes he didn't understand what the Spirit wanted him to do or why. Perhaps he would just use his knife to put some injured or trapped animal out of its misery. Mercy was never wasted.

He had never been good at gauging distances, which was a major problem living in western Texas. There was more land, more miles, more open space, than anybody back in Spain would have been able to comprehend. A person who couldn't keep track of where he was going would get lost, perhaps never to be found again. Alonzo had no idea how far he rode, but he knew the sun was much lower on the horizon behind him by the time he reached the vultures.

Alonzo pulled Angelica up short, his heart plummeting to his stomach. Their prey wasn't an animal. And not something to be put out of its misery.

Scrub brush dotted the landscape, roughening the surface of the earth in spite of a dusty trail that wound distinctly toward the darkening sky. There weren't many trees here, but on a slight rise some fifty feet ahead stood a tall yellow oak, its light gray bark almost silver in the setting sun. Gnarled limbs reached for the heavens, while the long, coarse leaves fluttered in the slight breeze. Its lowest branch had to be a good eight feet off the ground. Apparently, that hadn't stopped someone from stringing a man from it. Upside down.

His long, sun-darkened body dangled from the ropes binding his feet to the thick branch, while heavy chains manacled his wrists together where they hung below his head. He was stretched to his limit, the weight of the irons keeping

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him from pulling up to work on the knots around his bare ankles. All he wore was a pair of dirty trousers. The finely corded muscles of his arms and shoulders gleamed in a wet sheen.

Alonzo swallowed the bile in the back of his throat. The dampness wasn't just sweat from exposure to the sun. Rivulets of blood streaked down the man's back, dripping steadily onto the thirsty ground below him.

Alonzo dug his heels into the Angelica's ribs, kicking her into a run. Or as close to a run as the old, white donkey could manage. The man barely acknowledged him as he stopped just short of his hanging body. He wasn't dead, though. His muscles still quivered every time a fly landed on a stream of blood. But he would be if he didn't get cut down, soon.

“¿Señor?” Alonzo hunched down beside him, taking a white handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the blood coating his mouth and nose. “¿Señor?”

Though the thick lashes flickered, they didn't part. His lips did. The tip of his tongue appeared to moisten the cracked skin, and the muscles of his throat worked as he tried to swallow. A groan escaped him, as rough and ragged as his breathing. But he didn't otherwise acknowledge Alonzo's aid.

Alonzo straightened and studied the knots at the man's ankles. He would be able to cut through the rope without too much trouble, but that wasn't his real concern. He didn't want to drop the poor man on his head, but he wouldn't be able to support the man's weight.

He returned to Angelica and took the knife from her

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saddlebags. He had his rain slicker rolled up on the back, and he grabbed that with his canteen of water. He unfolded and laid the coat down on the ground beneath the man, so at least he would not land on anything sharp or that could cause further damage.

The knots were tight, but the rope wasn't as thick as it could have been. Alonzo cut the first cleanly. The second was more difficult, the strands pulled taut from the man's weight. When it gave way, the man cried out, loud enough to startle Alonzo into stepping back.

"Wait." The deep voice was hoarse and halting. Alonzo crouched down to see the man had finally opened his eyes, blinking more than once to clear the dried blood that had stuck some of his lashes together. "Give me...moment." He tried to take a deep breath, only to wince in pain. "Can...help."

Alonzo opened his canteen and wet the corner of the kerchief with a dab of the precious water. He wiped it across the man's lips, smearing the liquid across the dry skin. His tongue flicked out, clearly seeking more water, but Alonzo knew he couldn't give him more. Not yet.

"I'll not let you fall," Alonzo promised. "Are you ready?"

"Wait." The muscles in his arms tensed. Though the chains forced his arms straight anyway, the man stretched the rest of the way to brace his hands against the dusty ground. His breathing became audible, but he did not otherwise make any sound of discomfort. "Now."

Alonzo wrapped his arm around the man's knees, holding him tightly as he brought the blade to the rope. He sawed into

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the rope's fiber, freeing it a strand at a time, until the last one finally snapped. Alonzo nearly stumbled beneath the sudden weight of the man, but he kept his feet. With the stranger's help, Alonzo managed to gently lower him to the rain slicker.

Alonzo immediately knelt at the man's shoulder and cradled his head, lifting it slightly so he could put the canteen to his mouth.

At first, the water ran down his cheeks, but within a few moments, the stranger managed to tighten his lips around the mouthpiece and swallow some of it down. The sharp angles of his jaw and nose were more acute in a supine position, but the skin stretched over them—while blood-stained—was unmarked. All the blood came from his lower body. Alonzo could do nothing more than glance at the raw stripes crisscrossing his flesh.

The man didn't protest when he pulled the canteen away. "My thanks," he said, though his voice was still coarse. He sank back onto the ground, his gaze darting upward to the manacles weighing his arms down. He sighed and promptly closed his eyes again. "Though perhaps it's best if you go."

"No, I can't do that." Alonzo leaned over to inspect the manacles. The chain was not thick, but there wasn't anything he could do about it there. Dried blood lined the cuffs and colored the man's palms. He had no doubt that if he didn't get those off his wrists, an infection would set in. "We have a little time before we need to leave. It'll give you a chance to catch your breath."

"It's your breath I fear for, Father."

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But the stranger left it at that, resting there nearly motionless as he seemingly gathered his strength. It gave Alonzo a few moments to absorb more details, like the auburn glints in the dark hair that fell in straight sheets past the man's shoulders, and the wide slash of his mouth, the lips surprisingly full in spite of being cracked and bleeding. His youth surprised Alonzo. His face was unlined, even though it was obvious he spent a great deal of time in the sun. It was likely he was at least five years less than Alonzo's twenty-seven.

"What's your name, *señor*?"

The narrow nostrils flared, and the man swallowed again. "Ben."

"I'm Father Alonzo Vargas. I live in a presidio west of here. You'll be able to stay there until you're...healed." Alonzo wanted to push for more details about the young man, but he knew the facts would come out with time. If they surfaced at all. "There's nobody else there but me."

Ben tried to shake his head, but the stretch of his arms imprisoned him too well. He opened his eyes instead, the dark depths pleading. "You don't need my kind of trouble, Father."

Alonzo was too captivated by Ben's dark eyes to answer him immediately. At first glance, they were nothing out of the ordinary. But a more careful perusal revealed tiny golden glints buried in their depths. "It's my duty to care for the sick and the weak, *señor*. I'm afraid that I don't have a choice in the matter."

"What if I told you it was Sheriff Cullen who strung me up

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in that tree?”

An almost alien flare of anger erupted in his chest. He knew Sheriff John Cullen, by sight and by reputation. Though he had never heard of the sheriff stringing people up by their feet, he wasn't the least bit surprised to hear that the sorry excuse for a man was behind this disgusting display.

“I would remind you that I answer to a higher authority than Cullen.”

His soft exhalation was half sigh. “I don't think Sheriff Cullen would see it that way.” He tried to shift his weight and winced, grimacing in pain. “Might I trouble you for another drink?”

“Yes, but you have to take it slow.” Alonzo supported his head again and held the canteen to Ben's lips. “If you drink too fast, it'll make you sick.” He only allowed a few swallows before pulling the water away. “How long have you been here?”

“Since noon. Sheriff said he wanted me up while it was hot, so the buzzards would have plenty of time to sniff around.”

It was possible Cullen was still in the area—or planned to return to check on his handiwork. In that case, Alonzo wanted to be safely ensconced in the presidio as soon as possible. They were too vulnerable out in the open.

“You can ride Angelica, my donkey, back to the presidio. Do you think you can stand?”

“I...I can try.”

The muscles in his jaw tensed as he clenched his teeth, but

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he didn't ask for help as he rolled onto his side. The chain dragged through the dust, and Alonzo covered his nose with his kerchief to keep from sneezing. Ben seemed unperturbed by the disturbance, his nostrils flaring as he worked to straighten. Every muscle stood out, even those half-exposed from the flaying Cullen must have given him. It took several minutes, but he finally stood on his own two feet, shockingly straight and tall.

Alonzo gingerly wrapped his arm around Ben, trying to give him the support he needed without applying too much pressure to the wounds on his back. He whistled softly at the donkey, and she approached them with plodding steps. She wasn't a tall donkey, and Alonzo was able to lift the young man on her back—he was so light. Had he been in the town's jail for long before Cullen left him to die?

Once Ben was secure, Alonzo gathered up the coat and draped it over the other man's shoulders. The clouds he had been watching for were finally gathering over the mountains. He just hoped they didn't get caught out in the storm.

In spite of the weights around his wrists and the injuries to his bare back, Ben held himself remarkably upright as Angelica plodded along. The rough terrain jostled him more than once, but the strongest reaction he ever gave was a mild frown. Whether it was pride or stoicism that helped him maintain such a brave front, Alonzo didn't know. For now, though, the distinction was unnecessary. The important matter at hand was to get back to the presidio as quickly as possible.

Alonzo followed the tracks that they left in the soft dirt,

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squinting into the darkness as the sun fell faster and faster. Eventually, it was even too dark to follow those, but by then, Alonzo could see the vague outline of the presidio. Ben rode in silence. It was almost as if Alonzo was traveling alone again. Ben needed to keep his strength, so Alonzo did not prompt him to speak. Instead, he mulled over what he could feed the injured man. He had plenty of cornmeal, and a few eggs from the hens he kept.

The first cold drop of rain on his cheek stunned him. He looked up into the heavy blanket of clouds in time to catch a jagged slice of lightning.

“You should leave me here.” They were the first words Ben had spoken since leaving what would have been his grave, but when Alonzo tried to make out his features, the darkness masked them. “The storm does not bode well for you.”

“I’m not going to leave you here.” He tugged on Angelica’s rope, prompting her into a faster walk. “Given your injuries, this storm could kill you.”

“The same could be said for you, if the Sheriff discovers you took me in.” The chains clanked as Ben bent over Angelica’s neck and attempted to reach for the rope. “I’m not worth putting yourself at risk, Father.”

“I don’t fear Cullen.” Alonzo gently pushed Ben’s hands away. “And you are worth every risk.”

For all his bravado, Ben remained slumped forward, his broad shoulders sagging. Exhaustion finally. It would make it easier to take him the rest of the way.

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“Do you know you saved a killer?” The rain came down faster now, fat drops that splattered on contact. Ben’s voice cut through all of it. “An unrepentant killer at that.”

“That is between you and God.” Though Alonzo hoped Ben would change his mind about being unrepentant. They were all sinners in the eye of the Lord, but that didn’t mean they were without hope. And when Ben spoke, Alonzo heard a man who had no hope left. “I haven’t been tasked with the burden of judgment. And I would be just as guilty if I left you to die.”

“And you have no fear for your own life? I’ve killed once. How do you know I won’t kill you at the first chance I get?”

“I don’t know that. But I have faith in God’s plan for me. I don’t believe you would kill the man who rescued you from a painful, ignoble death.”

“I would if you were one of Cullen’s men.” A rush of breath. An almost silent wince. “Except Cullen’s men would never show such mercy.”

“I’m not one of his men. Cullen already has reason to dislike me. Last year, I refused to let him torture two Mexican boys who were accused of stealing a horse. Not long after that, I received word that I was being reassigned to the old San Elizario presidio.”

Rain trickled down the back of his collar, cooling in spite of the discomfort of being wet. Beneath his feet, the ground remained firm, drinking in every drop and then begging for more. It would take more than this one storm to sate it.

They were almost to the presidio’s gates when Ben spoke

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again.

“Thank you, Father. I hope you are right about your God’s plan.”

“So do I.” He led Angelica right up to the door before stopping and offering his hand. Ben took it, his fingers surprisingly strong, and allowed Alonzo to help him off the donkey. “You go inside. I’m going to take care of Angelica.”

Ben took a single step and stopped. Shrugging off the coat Alonzo had placed over his shoulders earlier, he managed to catch it before it fell to the ground.

“Here.” The hem dragged in the wet dust, but he held it out as best he could with the manacles weighing him down. “You will need this more than I.”

Alonzo disagreed, but he would rather have Ben inside where it was mostly warm and mostly dry than outside arguing with him. He took the coat and draped it over his shoulders. “There’s fresh water inside. And some wine, if you need it.”

He waited until Ben disappeared into the low building before turning to take Angelica to the stable in the back. He understood the younger man’s fear, but with God’s strength, Alonzo was certain he could heal Ben’s physical and spiritual wounds.

CHAPTER 2

“I have eggs if you’re hungry...” Alonzo’s words stopped short as his foot nudged something soft. He immediately fumbled for the candelabra he kept near the door, only taking the time to light a single taper. The small, dancing flame was more than enough to cut through the darkness and reveal that Ben had barely made it inside the door before collapsing.

“Dios mio...”

Why had he just walked away? Angelica would have been fine in the rain. He should have seen to Ben’s comfort and health before worrying about a stubborn beast. Moving quickly in the dark, he lit the nearest lamps, turning the flame up to chase the shadows out of the room. The fire was low—

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almost burned out entirely. He laid fresh fuel on the warm ashes and stoked it until new flames caught and spread.

“I’m so sorry, Ben,” Alonzo murmured, crouching to put one arm under his neck and the other under Ben’s knees. He lifted him easily and carried him across the small room to the pallet beside the fireplace.

Ben stirred upon contact with the rough ticking, but his attempts to sit up were easily thwarted by Alonzo’s hand on his shoulder. “Hurts,” he muttered. His thick lashes fluttered as he fought to waken, and he struggled with the chains, his strength obviously sapped. “My back...”

“I know. I’m sorry. I have to make a poultice for your back. That’ll help. You need to dry and get warm.” Which wouldn’t happen if he kept his wet pants on, Alonzo realized. The material was heavy, soaked through, and cold to the touch. Alonzo worked the buttons free and moved to Ben’s feet to pull the garment down his legs. “I’ve got dry clothes for you once I’ve taken care of your injuries.”

Firelight flickered across Ben’s skin as Alonzo slowly exposed it to the air. Its rich tone continued past his waist and down his thighs, with even darker hair curling over the hard muscles. His ankles were almost completely abraded from the rope. He had walked without limping so nothing was likely to be broken, but boots would be uncomfortable until the broken skin was healed.

The flames dancing across Ben’s dark eyes made them glow. “Is there...anyone else here?”

Alonzo straightened and spread the pants out on the floor

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near the fire. “No. No, it’s just the two of us.”

Ben’s gaze darted around the room. “I’ve taken your bed.”

“Yes, but I’ll live.” Alonzo began sorting through the small glass jars—his prized possessions—and small packages of herbs, flowers, and roots. He busied himself with the poultice, though his attention was drawn again and again to Ben’s naked body. “I have extra blankets. I’ll make another bed.”

Ben deflated, the fight taken out of him, and his lashes drifted shut. He held himself awkwardly on the pallet, his upper body twisted to keep as much of his back away from the ticking as possible, but otherwise didn’t move. Even his breaths were barely noticeable, though the creeping shadows from the fire made it seem like the muscles twitched beneath the marked skin.

As soon as the thick, soothing mixture was finished, Alonzo searched for something that could be used for rags. He only had four shirts, and nothing else that would serve the purpose of bandages, except the rough sheet Ben was currently resting on. He chose his most threadbare shirt and began tearing it into strips.

“Can you turn onto your side?”

Without a word, every muscle in Ben’s arms tensed. He lifted them over his head, using the momentum to help roll toward the wall. It left him with one arm curled beneath his head as a pillow and his back now drying in the heat of the fireplace. Blood stained the ticking where laying down had opened his wounds again, and for the first time, Alonzo saw

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the bruises mottling his buttocks and upper thighs. The pants had hidden them until now, and while the skin wasn't broken, there were enough to make it appear that purple was his natural skin tone.

Alonzo filled a basin with water from the pitcher, then carried it, the bowl with the mix of plants, and the rags over to Ben. "This is going to be a bit cold. I'm sorry."

As the words left his mouth, he realized he had been apologizing a great deal. But he was deeply sorry that even though he was doing his best, he couldn't do anything more, couldn't give Ben better care. Putting a comforting hand on Ben's shoulder, he dipped a rag into the water and began the task of washing his back.

Ben only made a sound at the initial contact, and even that was a strangled cry he swallowed down at the same time his muscles braced for the cleansing. The more blood Alonzo rinsed away, the more convinced he became Ben's back would be a mess of scars when it healed. Cullen had not taken pity on his prisoner. In some sections, he had literally flayed the skin away.

By the time all the blood was gone, Ben was panting. "Could I...before you go further, might I have some of that wine? Or whiskey, if you've got some."

"Of course."

He didn't have any whiskey, but he had a few bottles of wine he had been saving since he left Spain. He always had some sort of special occasion in mind, and he couldn't think of anything more worthy than easing a man's suffering. He filled

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a goblet half full with the dark liquid, then knelt beside Ben to help him into an upright position.

“Just lean against me,” Alonzo said as he held the cup to Ben’s lips.

Unlike the water from the canteen, Ben didn’t waste a drop. It wet his lips, reddening them further. When Alonzo lowered the goblet, Ben’s breathing had noticeably slowed.

“Thank you.” He smiled, or tried to at least. “I think you’ll be hearing that a lot from me.”

“*De nada.*” He set the cup on the floor and lowered Ben to his side. “I would do more for you if I could.” Alonzo positioned himself at Ben’s back once again and started the careful process of covering his back with the rags. “Hopefully, this will ease the pain enough so you can sleep tonight.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to. I fought it all day, afraid if I did, I wouldn’t wake again.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll make sure that you wake again, even if I have to stay up all night to watch you.”

“You need sleep, too.”

“God will have to sustain me during my vigil.” He leaned back to survey his work. “How does this feel?”

“Better than Cullen’s whip.” Ben took a deep breath, the butterfly bows of his shoulder blades lifting and falling. “How did you find me? Cullen took me out so far because he didn’t want anyone to know what he was doing. How did you?”

“I was out looking for herbs. I’ve been watching the sky all day for thunderclouds, and I noticed the...buzzards circling. I wondered if there was an animal in distress.”

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Alonzo smoothed another rag across Ben's ribs. "Perhaps God led me to you."

"Sounds like it was the birds." He made a sound of amusement, only to wince as it jarred his injuries. "Whatever it was, I'm grateful. I know I said things outside...I just don't want to see good people get hurt because of me."

"Life is about risk out here. There are no guarantees. Nobody is ever completely safe. Men like Cullen come out this far to get away from a society where their cruel impulses are kept in check. The Rio could flood this summer and wipe us all out. Indians could attack at any time, or the Mexicans who don't know the war is over. You can't be afraid of risk..." Alonzo skimmed his fingers over Ben's side, searching for any sign of a broken rib. His skin was taut and smooth, unbelievably soft. "Or nothing out here would ever get done."

"There's a difference between risk for me and risk for others, though." In spite of his obvious discomfort, he glanced back at Alonzo over his shoulder, his dark eyes solemn. "I don't want to be responsible for another life if I can't know I won't hurt it somehow."

"You're not responsible for my life, *señor*. And there's no difference between you and others. Everybody deserves mercy. Everybody deserves kindness. Christ did not pick and choose who he cared for."

His dark lashes ducked, flickering over Alonzo's length, bent and bowed at his back. "You're not Christ."

"No, I would never presume to compare myself to our

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Savior, but I do my best to do His work. And that includes caring for injured men who seem to believe they're not worth the effort." Alonzo stood. "I'll get your clothes."

"Do I need them yet?" Ben settled carefully on his stomach, situating the chains above his head as he turned to gaze at Alonzo. "This is more comfortable."

"I don't want you to get cold and get sick." But the fire was burning high and despite the downpour, there wasn't much of a draft blowing through the old building. Alonzo's gaze travelled down Ben's body, noting the strips of cloth across his back, the still visible bruises on his ribs, the scabs and bits of blood that Alonzo had missed while he was washing him. And more, like the curve of his bottom, the hard muscles in his thighs and calves. "Are you hungry?"

"No, but you must be. I kept you from your dinner." He almost smiled, and it brightened his entire face. "Eat. God wouldn't want you to starve yourself on my account."

Alonzo had no intention of eating in front of Ben. Though he did not expect that a sound whipping, followed by hanging upside down from a tree, would necessarily encourage an appetite, he did think Ben needed to keep up his strength. A weak person would not be able to heal—and he had a great deal of healing to do.

"I'll prepare enough for both of us, in case you change your mind." Alonzo gathered up the eggs he had abandoned when he saw Ben on the floor, and was relieved to see they were all unbroken. He had early potatoes from his small garden, as well as corn, tomatoes, and squash. "It's been a

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very long time since I've shared a meal with another person."

"It has? How can you share the word of God if you don't get the company of others to speak with?"

"I can't. Cullen has made it as clear as he could that he doesn't want to see me in town, and Fort Davis has a priest. But this is where I'm assigned and here I must stay."

The half-smile disappeared, replaced by cold anger. "That's not right. He has no right to drive you from your duty."

"I agree. And I..." Alonzo paused, debating whether he should finish the sentence. But if anybody understood what Cullen could do to a man—mentally and physically—it was Ben. "I detest myself for allowing it to happen."

"So don't let it." The vitriol in Ben's voice surprised Alonzo. "You still believe. You still have faith. Don't let Cullen win. You said it yourself. You can't be afraid of risk. Especially when there's a man like Cullen involved."

Alonzo began scrubbing the dirt from the small potatoes. "Are you going to return to San Elizario when you have your strength up?"

Ben set his jaw. "I'm not running from my home, no matter what Cullen wants. Even if I have to kill every one of his deputies in order to keep it."

"Is that what you did? Did you kill one of his deputies?"

"I defended my land."

"I never said you were a murderer. Were you defending it against Cullen's men?"

The wide mouth sealed shut.

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Alonzo focused on the potatoes in his hand, refusing to put Ben even more ill at ease by trying to press him to speak when he obviously wasn't ready.

"Cullen is greedy and wants what doesn't belong to him," Ben said, breaking the silence that had settled between them. "That land is all I have. All that I am. His man tried to force me to sign an agreement, giving it to Cullen, and when I refused..." He exhaled and closed his eyes, shaking his head in resignation. "I warned Cullen I would not go peacefully. His deputy's blood is on his hands, as well as mine."

"So, instead of arresting you and putting you on trial for murder, risking exposure of his own greed, he beat you and left you to die a slow death. Your land is vulnerable right now."

"I know. I do not plan on it being vulnerable for long."

"You need to be stronger before you face him." Alonzo couldn't resist dragging his gaze over Ben's bare back again. "It'll be too dangerous in your current state. You have a bit of time before he can legally put a claim on your land, even if the whole town presumes you dead."

Ben's eyes opened again, driving Alonzo's focus back on his food preparation. "You don't seem surprised by what he did. Have you lost faith already in saving his soul?"

"Cullen made his deal with the devil. Should he wish to confess and repent his sins, I won't turn my back on him. But some men...they don't want to be saved."

"And you think I do?"

"You're very defensive." Alonzo set the cleaned potatoes

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aside and began husking the corn. “You don’t want to die. And you don’t want Cullen to be the one who takes your life. As for your soul, if I were only concerned with that, I would have performed the last rites and left you where I found you.”

His answer seemed to quell whatever ire had been rising inside the young man. Ben relaxed into the pallet and let his eyelids droop.

“You’re a very interesting man, Father. Any other of your kind would have started preaching at me the moment I admitted I’d sinned.”

“You can’t force a man to be penitent. And you’re not a heathen. You’ve heard God’s word, even if you aren’t interested in following it.” Alonzo continued stripping the corn, exposing kernels that were more white than yellow. It wouldn’t taste sweet this early, but it was still better than going hungry. “I may travel back to town with you.”

Ben shook his head, though his obvious exhaustion was starting to slow him down again. “You shouldn’t. You should go on your own. You don’t want Cullen to know you helped me get down.”

“No. He ran me out because I stood up against him when nobody else would. I’m not going to pretend that I’ll look the other way, should I return.”

“He’ll charge you with helping a prisoner escape. You won’t do anybody any good behind bars, Father.”

“The people in San Elizario will not tolerate seeing a man of the cloth behind bars for doing his job. Moreover, if he charges me with that crime, he’d be forced to explain why I

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found said prisoner hanging upside down, beaten and bloody.”

This time, the smile was full, warm and genuine, if more than a little sleepy. “I would hate to be on the side opposing you, Father. I am fairly sure we would lose.”

“I just pray for the strength to be on God’s side.” Ben’s eyes were drooping, but he seemed to be fighting his exhaustion. Alonzo wanted him to eat, but sleep was important, too. He poured more wine into the bottom of the goblet and crouched beside Ben’s head. “Here. Drink this.”

Ben obeyed, his lips glistening, the muscles in his throat working as he swallowed. His gaze never wavered from Alonzo, in spite of his weariness, lingering long after Alonzo set the goblet down.

“I almost hate to ask this of you, considering how much you’ve done for me already. But...do you have anything that might break the chain? The weight is bearable. The fact that I am tethered is not.”

“I have an axe. I might be able to break it.” He gently gripped Ben’s shoulder and helped him into a kneeling position. He had a large, flat stump of wood near the fire, which he used to split kindling. “Pull the chain tight.”

Though Ben’s features were hard with concentration, he summoned his strength to lift his arms so the chain straddled the wood’s surface. He gathered the loose links in his hands and let his fists dangle over the edge. He didn’t even look up to watch what Alonzo did. Instead, he bowed his head and waited for the blow to come.

The axe was heavy in Alonzo’s hand, but he lifted it high

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over his head. If he missed, he risked injuring Ben. Ben, who knelt before him in the most vulnerable, the most trusting position possible. He silently prayed to God to guide his hand. He prayed for the strength to break through the chains that bound Ben—the one he could see and the ones he couldn't.

He felt a sudden surge of power up his spine and through his shoulders. With a grunt, he brought the axe down. The blade sliced through the links like they were made of cotton.

Ben had held his arms as tight as the chains. His fists did nothing but slide an inch when the tension binding them together was broken. His shoulders, however, slumped, and more than one of the rags covering his wounds slipped free.

“Thank you, Father,” he murmured. “You will not regret it.”

“I know I won't. I'm sorry I can't do anything about your wrists.”

Slowly, Ben sat back on his heels. “No, this is enough. This is more than enough.” The eyes he lifted to Alonzo's face burned bright enough for him to wonder if the young man was fevered. “Whatever you wish, I'll give. I cannot repay you enough.”

“I'm not helping you with the expectation of repayment.” Alonzo swallowed, momentarily struck silent by the intensity in Ben's eyes. He was simply beautiful. “You should...you should sleep.”

Ben bowed his head again and eased back, finding the edge of the pallet with a newfound grace. Perhaps with his hands now free, he possessed balance he'd previously lacked.

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However it might be, he settled onto his stomach with no aid from Alonzo's hands, coiling his arms over his head as his gaze returned to Alonzo.

"I'll stay awake until you've eaten," he said as Alonzo rested the axe against the wall. "To keep you company. You've spent as much of your time alone as I have, I think."

"Why are you alone?" He settled at the table and began slicing the potatoes. "Do you have a wife or a fiancée to send for once you're settled?"

"No, there's no one. This is the only home I've known."

"You're from the Mexican territory? Why do you speak English?"

"My father. He taught my mother when she left the tribe for him, and she continued to use it after he died." Sad shadows danced in his eyes. "It was one of the few ways she could honor his memory, she said."

Alonzo frowned thoughtfully. He was not surprised to hear that Ben's mother was an Indian, given the tone of his skin. Many of the people native to the area were a hodgepodge of races and backgrounds. "Was your father a scout?"

"No, just a man. His family owned a plantation in Jamaica, but he left there to find his own way before the revolts. When I was little, he always told me stories about his travels before he found my mother's tribe." His mouth slanted. "It was very exciting when I was four. Now, it amazes me he could leave his home so easily."

Alonzo's answering smile held a hint of sadness. "I suppose when a man's home doesn't have what he needs,

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there's no other choice.”

“That sounds like you know from personal experience.”

“Yes, some. I didn't become a priest with the intention of leaving Spain for America. But my village, and my family, were very poor, and I did see it as a way out of that...poverty.”

Ben's gaze flickered around the bare room. The stark interior had been even more so before Alonzo had taken residence, but he knew that the few niceties he had added, the fresh vegetation he used to bring life into the room, did little to compensate.

“You should have a congregation.” So he wasn't going to comment on the lack of disparity between what Alonzo had left and what he had gained. And the soft smile still lingered on his beautiful face. “I can see many people following you. You...have a way.”

“I'd like to. There are a lot of people out here who need God's grace. And they need an advocate. Something Cullen wishes to stop.”

“Because it scares him. He can't control faith, so he won't have it around.”

“No, he can't control me. Faith is quite a useful tool to him, as it is to any man who longs for absolute power.” Alonzo moved to the fire and put his heavy, cast-iron pan into the coals. “Cullen was very kind to me when I first arrived in San Elizario. That only began to change when I refused to take his bribes.”

“In his world, loyalty is bought and paid for. He doesn't

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understand what honor is.”

“No, he does not.” Alonzo looked over his shoulder. “Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat?”

“I am sure. Thank you.” His eyes were heavier, each blink coming more often, lasting for longer. “I think you were right earlier. I should sleep.”

“Yes. That would be best.”

Alonzo watched as Ben stopped struggling against his obvious exhaustion. Finally, his eyes closed and remained that way. Alonzo crossed himself and murmured a short prayer, beseeching the Virgin to watch over Ben, to protect him, and to heal his body. He kept watch throughout the night, and each time Ben stirred or seemed troubled, Alonzo repeated the prayer until he was soothed again. The cycle of praying and watching only ceased when Alonzo submitted to his own exhaustion, and fell asleep sitting up in his chair.

CHAPTER 3

Waking was an odd concoction, relief and aches rolled into a dull throb that settled in Ben's bones. He opened his eyes without weariness, as he did every morning, but failed to recognize his surroundings for several moments. It wasn't until his gaze settled on the man sprawled in a nearby chair that he remembered the events of the previous day. Being cut down from the tree. The jolting ride to the presidio. An evening both blurred by the sharp pain suffusing his body and sharpened by the joy at being free to fight Cullen another day.

All due to the kind spirit of Father Alonzo.

Ben had little exposure to clergy, though his father had talked often about his faith, especially right before his death

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took him away. From his stories, though, Ben had always envisioned men of the cloth as older, someone to look up to, someone to lead, much like the elders his mother had described. Father Alonzo was nothing like he'd expected.

He was too young to begin with. And his hands were too firm, too used to toil to be clasped in prayer for extended periods of time. The dark ridge of his brows did little to hide the shine in his brown eyes, and his mouth was too full, too ready to smile, to be someone eager to foretell damnation. Granted, he was older than Ben, but not by much. Even now, with the dying embers of the fire casting half his face in shadows, he seemed too innocent for such doomsaying.

The loose chains clanked softly as Ben tried to sit up. His muscles screamed. His back was killing him, but if he stayed on the pallet, it would only get worse. He needed to move around and loosen the joints. His legs still worked perfectly well, if for the chafing around his ankles from the rope burns.

He caught the broken iron links in his hands and kept them silent as he stood. At some point in the night, Father Alonzo had brushed off his trousers and laid them out to dry. Ben gathered them and slipped through the doorway, ready to dress outside the man's hearing. He didn't wish to wake him. Father Alonzo had already done too much to help him as it was.

Though he knew he would have to find a shirt at some point, he was glad Cullen had taken his away for now. The poultices Father Alonzo had applied eased some of the sting, but the welts would be sensitive and sore for several days. He would have to move carefully not to make them worse, but the

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restriction of a garment would have rubbed against them the wrong way.

His mouth was dry. Scanning the area around the small presidio, he spotted a barn and headed toward it. If there was a well, it would be near the animals. And while he fetched water for himself, he might as well do so for them and Father Alonzo. In fact, he might as well see what else he could do to help out, as long as he was there.

The donkey—what had Father Alonzo called her? Angelica?—greeted him with a loud bray as soon as he stepped into the barn. The chickens were already clucking around, searching for their breakfast in the slate gray dawn. Alonzo also had a goat, tethered in the yard, and sleeping just inside the barn door. After surveying the animals, Ben decided it wouldn't hurt to feed them, and at least get those chores out of the way.

Once he was done in the barn, he sought out the garden Father Alonzo must have kept. It was a decent-sized plot of land, well kept, and well watered. The priest must have carried buckets of water to it by hand. Studying the garden, he realized there were small weeds sprouting above the loose soil.

Alonzo's soft voice stopped him from bending to pull the shoots of green. "How long have you been awake?"

Ben glanced at the sky before answering. "Half an hour? Maybe three quarters." He gestured toward the garden. "I thought I'd see to these weeds before it got too light outside."

Alonzo tilted his head. "Why?"

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The question caught him short. “What do you mean? If they don’t get pulled, they’ll overrun your crops.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. For one thing, those little weeds are in no danger of overrunning my garden. And why do you think you need to pull weeds, anyway?”

“Perhaps not today, but...” Ben didn’t understand why Alonzo objected to his weeding. He was up and walking and clearly capable. “I’m not comfortable taking your hospitality without offering something in return. You’ve already done so much for me. A few weeds are nothing in comparison.”

Alonzo stared at him. “You’re not taking my hospitality. You’re more like...a patient. And I don’t demand repayment for my aid.”

“A patient doesn’t usually require being cut down from a tree.” Ben smiled, hoping to wipe away the priest’s frown. “If you don’t allow me to help, I’ll have to leave, and then how will you feel about losing a patient?”

“Come back inside. You need to eat breakfast. Then we can discuss how much weeding needs to be done.”

“You’re going to stand there and argue with me until I go, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. I have my own stubborn streak.”

His smile widened. “And I know how to pick my battles. Lead the way, Father.”

They fell into step side by side, the length of their paces naturally slipping into an easy rhythm. Ben was careful to keep his back straight to lessen the aggravation, though he knew Alonzo noticed his firm posture.

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“How are you feeling? I still have enough of everything to make fresh poultices.”

“I think these will do for the time-being,” he said. “All I need is something to eat.”

“Speaking of food, do I need to take care of the animals? Or did you?”

“No, they’re fed. And watered. I would’ve brought up more water for later, but you interrupted me.”

Alonzo paused, his dark eyes studying the length of Ben’s body. “Maybe after breakfast, we should discuss this a bit more. I have a feeling you won’t simply rest and give your body a chance to heal.”

He wanted nothing more than to be able to heal, but time was not his friend. Once Cullen discovered he wasn’t dead, he would have to stake his claim on his land even more vigilantly than before. “I give you my word not to do too much. That’s the best I can offer.”

“I’ll accept that, because like you, I know when to pick my battles.” He reached over to touch a piece of cloth hanging off Ben’s shoulder. “I should check to make sure your skin hasn’t split open again.”

Ben nodded, though he kept his attention forward. It had been a long time since another human had touched him in anything but anger. The most difficult part of the previous evening had been willing away his reaction to Alonzo’s gentle hands. They had been warmer than the fire, and combined with Alonzo’s softly modulated voice, had heated Ben’s blood even more so. He’d been grateful he was stretched out on his

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stomach. He would have been ashamed had Alonzo noticed his arousal.

There was only one chair in Alonzo's small living space, but Ben didn't want to settle on the pallet again. Alonzo tried to make him take the chair, but he preferred to stand, giving his muscles a chance to stretch and work. He helped when he could, but the priest moved around the small space easily, cutting several slices from the bacon, slicing the rest of the potatoes from the night before, and cracking the eggs.

It wasn't long until the rich smell of frying meat filled the room. Ben's stomach rumbled and his mouth watered. He didn't realize quite how hungry he was until his tongue started to tingle at the thought of biting into the salty, thick bacon. Father Alonzo looked up and smiled at one point, almost as if he could hear the voracious growls coming from his midsection.

"It won't be long," he promised.

"What do you do when you're not thwarting Sheriff Cullen?" The garden was nice-sized, but with regular maintenance, it wouldn't take much work. And the animals were few. Ben couldn't stop trying to figure out how Father Alonzo occupied his time.

"I study the Bible. I also have some Spanish volumes I'm translating into English. There's so little culture out here, I thought certain people might appreciate the effort." Alonzo frowned. "Of course, that's slow going because I don't exactly have a great deal of paper. I pray. I'm cataloguing all of the flora and fauna native to the area for future reference. I

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meditate.” The frown turned into a wry smile. “I hold long conversations with Angelica.”

“As long as she doesn’t start talking back.” Alonzo’s chuckle relaxed him even further, and he wandered around the perimeter of the room, absorbing the finer details. “Where do you keep your books? My father had a special chest he always stored his books and papers in.”

“I keep mine in a chest, too.” He gestured toward a box in a far corner of the room. “It seemed smarter to keep them there than just laying around. Do you still have your father’s books?”

“Yes. Mother didn’t get rid of them after he passed, though I haven’t looked at them at all since she died, either. If you’d like, you could pick out a few for yourself. Someone should probably read them.”

“No, I couldn’t take your father’s books. You should keep them and read them. Think of it as a way to...be closer to your father.”

Ben retreated to the chair, taking care to sit forward on the seat. “I have memories for that. And the books aren’t being read anyway. I never learned well enough to master them, and my mother couldn’t read at all, so I stopped completely after he died.”

“Would you have any interest in learning?”

Alonzo asked the question bent over the fire, poking at the bacon in the pan. Ben regarded the fine arc of his back, the long length of his hands, graceful and strong. He had had dual purposes for sitting, but as he tried not to focus on what those

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hands had felt like on his skin, he realized it was likely a losing battle. He just hoped Alonzo wouldn't notice.

"I've never thought about it," he confessed. "I can read enough when I go into town and order supplies, but it's never seemed necessary to learn anything more."

"Well, it might not be *necessary* to learn more." Alonzo straightened and stretched his back, pulling his shirt tight across his chest. "You could probably live without mastering the ability. But the ability to read those books...it'll introduce you to new worlds and new thoughts. You can learn a lot about a man from the books he treasures."

Silently, Ben agreed. "So what kind of books do you treasure? Other than your Bible."

"Oh. My father gave me a copy of *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* when I left for America. It was his father's copy. I have some in English, too. *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. And of course, Milton's *Paradise Lost*."

The names meant nothing to Ben, and for the first time, he felt inadequate in Alonzo's presence. This was a learned man. He toiled because he had to, but his best and most valuable instrument was his mind not his hands. Though his hands were certainly nothing to scorn.

"Do you hope to teach me to keep me from working?" Ben asked with a smile.

"I doubt I could teach you in just a day or two. And I doubt I could convince you to stay for longer than that."

"It wouldn't be wise. Cullen probably has men on my land already, to stake out a claim as soon as possible." He took the

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plate of food Alonzo offered, his stomach growling at the fresh scents. “The sooner I leave, the safer my home is.”

“That’s true.” Alonzo dished up his own plate and leaned against the wall. “And you probably don’t have the free time to take reading lessons. It takes a lot of time to work on the land on your own.”

As practical as it was, though, Ben found the reality rankled slightly. He liked Father Alonzo’s company. The sheer fact that he’d reacted so strongly to just a human touch indicated he needed more if he didn’t wish to go completely feral as his mother had always teased.

“How far are you from town here? If it’s not too far, perhaps we could work out some arrangement where you came once or twice a week.” He ducked his head as he dug into his food, unwilling to show the slight stain that had crept into his cheeks. “It would be nice to not be quite so alone sometimes.”

“I would like it more if I didn’t have to stay here. If Cullen is...weakened...then I can return to San Elizario.”

“It would be even better if Cullen is gone.”

“Yes.” Alonzo smiled. “But I can’t condone that.”

Ben matched his grin. “But could you close your eyes?”

“I shouldn’t. But sometimes...most times...I think I could in Cullen’s case.”

Ben ate his breakfast, weighing the import of Alonzo’s mission. He had never seriously considered the notion of killing Sheriff Cullen before his latest attempt to take over Ben’s land. After all, he was the law, corrupt as he might be.

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And there were repercussions. Not to mention, deep down, Ben didn't care for the violence that was often necessary for choosing to live so far from what his father had called civilization.

But evil had a way of begetting evil. Cullen's misdeeds were spreading like a sickness through the land. Ben thought that for the good of too many people, he could likely do this. He could take a life. And not feel anything but relief afterward.

"It doesn't mean you won't still be welcome in my home," Ben said. "If you'd rather not come out for lessons, you could come just for a visit."

"I'd be honored to visit your home, and happy to give you lessons. Though I hope that you're not just inviting me because you feel like you have an obligation."

"You're not an obligation." Ben glanced up and offered a tentative smile. "I hoped you were a friend."

"Of course, I am." Alonzo's smile was bright and warm. "But you woke up before dawn to feed my animals and weed my garden. So I wanted to be sure."

"I woke up because I don't sleep much, even when I'm not hurt. The weeding was just a consequence of that."

Alonzo bit into a potato and chewed it thoughtfully. "Do you honor the Sabbath?"

Ben shook his head. "My father never pressed the idea of church because of the different beliefs my mother had. Does that bother you?"

"I can't force you to go to church. But I meant, do you

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remember the Sabbath as a day of rest?"

"Not really. Why?"

Alonzo set the plate aside and folded his arms. "I know that for many people, the Commandments seem arbitrary. If you're not a religious man, there doesn't seem any good reason to follow most, or any, of the laws you'll find in the Bible. But, in some cases, there's sound logic behind them. Like the Sabbath being a day of rest and reflection. If you drive yourself too hard, you might meet an early end."

Ben relaxed again with his food. "This is you telling me not to help you around here again, isn't it?"

"Yes and no. I would prefer that you not push yourself too hard right now. But I'm speaking more broadly, as well. I suppose if you won't let me worry about your soul, I'll just have to worry about your health."

"So come on the Sabbath then. That way you'll be certain to do both."

"If I return to San Elizario, I shall be busy on Sundays."

"Oh. That's true." And more disappointing than he'd expected. "So I suppose we will simply see what happens then."

"But I have to eat. Maybe if you were to invite me for dinner..." Alonzo shrugged.

Ben met his dark gaze. "You will always be welcome in my home, Father."

Alonzo inclined his head. "Thank you. Have you had enough to eat?"

Though he was still a little hungry, Ben nodded and

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handed over his empty plate. He didn't want to abuse Alonzo's hospitality, even if the man refused to call it that. The simple brush of their fingers when Alonzo took it sent a small shiver up Ben's arm, enough for him to wish in a bright, fleeting moment that it was even more.

Perhaps that was why the request came out. Because he certainly did not feel the overwhelming need for it.

"Do you think you could take a look at my back now? I want to be sure it heals properly."

"Yes."

Alonzo gestured at the straw mattress and waited for Ben to lower himself before kneeling beside him. His fingers were light and careful, and Ben barely felt the contact. Except, he felt it everywhere. Alonzo did not have smooth fingers. The rough skin revealed more about the priest's life than anything else Ben had witnessed. He hauled water with those hands. He picked weeds and flowers. He cared for animals with those hands. And now, he was doing his best to doctor Ben back to health.

"There's still so much blood and dirt here. The rain helped a bit, but it would be easier, and better, if you were cleaner."

"Is there a stream nearby where I could bathe?"

"There's a tributary off the Rio a few miles from here, but after last night's storm, it's going to be running high, fast, and muddy."

That left only one other option. A dangerous one. For Ben, at least.

"Would it trouble you too much to wash them out for me?"

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he asked softly, almost afraid of the response.

“It wouldn’t be any trouble.” Alonzo began carefully pulling the bandages from his back, exposing the marks to the warm morning air. “I’ll go get the water and start it heating.”

Ben wanted to get up and help Alonzo haul fresh water from the well, but when he tried, Alonzo gently, but firmly, pushed him back to the pallet. He had no choice but to stay where he was, watching over his shoulder as Alonzo almost effortlessly hauled in two full buckets of water. The man was deceptively strong—he had broken through the chain easily enough. It made Ben wonder what he looked like once he removed his shirt and collar. Ben didn’t think he would have the chance to find out, so tried to put the whole notion out of his head. Except, he couldn’t do that. Not after Alonzo unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled his shirtsleeves to past his elbows.

While they waited for the water to warm, Alonzo busied himself by cleaning up after breakfast. He was a tidy man. That much was easy to see. He didn’t act like he was living in exile, away from his duty and his only reason for being this far west of the Mississippi. After he finished cleaning, he tested the water and nodded with clear approval.

“Not too hot or too cold. It’ll probably still sting, though.”

Ben rested his head on his folded arms, watching Alonzo as he knelt at his side. Already, his body responded to Alonzo’s proximity, warming even though he had yet to set a hand to Ben’s flesh. It had to be the call of his loneliness, yet the longer he spent with the man, the more Ben wished he

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could be wrong. He liked the proud set of his shoulders, the strength he didn't flaunt. He admired his faith, even if Ben didn't believe himself, and was grateful Alonzo didn't press to convert him. There were plenty of real causes to wish for company with the man that had nothing to do with how riveting his appearance was.

But this sort of perversion was frowned upon by his father's people, especially those of the cloth. Though his mother had been tolerant when Ben had fearfully confessed his desires for other men, he knew he couldn't expect the same elsewhere. He had to refrain from letting his attraction known, even if he was already hard at Alonzo's first touch.

He gritted his teeth against the slight sting Alonzo had warned about. "That's not so bad," he said with a smile.

"Talk to me," Alonzo invited. "It might help you take your mind off the pain. And I'm a good listener."

"What would you wish to talk about?"

"Whatever you like." The damp, warm tip of the rag dragged across the back of his neck. There was no injury there, and the light touch made his stomach flutter. "Tell me about your home."

"My father built it, for my mother when she left her people." Ben closed his eyes, picturing the details, drawing upon the memories he had of Thomas McKinnon. "It was much smaller when I was young. He built upon it as I got older and he became more skilled." His mouth curved. "My mother used to say he would be adding onto it until there was no more room in the territory. He was never pleased with his

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handiwork.”

“So your father was a carpenter? What do you do on the land? Are you a rancher or farmer?”

His smile widened. “My father wasn’t trained as such, no. He wasn’t trained as much of anything in his youth, which is why he was always trying to learn new things. But I farm primarily. Mostly because it’s just me. The land is better for ranching, but my parents were always very private. And after my father died, I didn’t like the idea of there being so many strange men around. My mother was very beautiful.”

“She must have been,” Alonzo murmured, squeezing fresh, warm water over his shoulder. The drops trickled down his arm to pool on the sheet, cooling as they glided over his flushed skin.

“Do you miss your family?”

“Sometimes. It’s been worse since I was sent to this presidio. I get bored with the sound of my own voice.” More water rolled down Ben’s spine, the drops running into each other and growing fat before sliding off his skin. The heat from the low fire dried them quickly. Alonzo’s hands followed the path of the droplets. “I write to them when I can be reasonably sure the post will eventually make it to them. But that’s not often.”

“I sometimes wonder if it would be worth it to find my mother’s tribe. To see if they would take me in as one of their own.” He caught his breath when Alonzo set the wet rag against the worst of the welts, one laid open and bare by multiple strokes of Cullen’s whip. He’d been able to ignore

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the pain from it by focusing on the overall throb, but now, with such careful attention focused on it alone, that was impossible. Several seconds went by before he was comfortable exhaling again.

“I’m sorry.” Alonzo put a soothing hand on Ben’s shoulder, his palm rough and warm. “There’s some grit in there. Things are going to get worse, I’m afraid.”

“Worse would have been you not coming along at all.” As the words slipped out, Ben heard the implication they carried, but it was too late to call them back. Hoping Alonzo would take them literally, he added, “I will manage. Do what you must.”

Ben’s face twisted, his eyes squeezing shut, as Alonzo continued to press the rag against the open wound. Then his feet arched and everything inside of him tightened as he did his best to withstand the pain.

“I’m sorry...I’m sorry...” Alonzo murmured the words over and over, but it almost sounded like he was talking to somebody else. That the apologies weren’t meant for Ben—or weren’t only meant for Ben.

Just when he thought he couldn’t take it anymore, the rag disappeared and Alonzo leaned forward, blowing a stream of cool air against his flesh to ease the sting, his mouth less than an inch away from Ben’s skin.

He hadn’t broken down for Cullen, hadn’t begged for mercy, hadn’t cried even when Cullen had offered to cut him down if he did. But now, he wanted to, if only to release the knots inside him from trying to ride out the pain. Alonzo

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would understand. He wouldn't judge. The only thing that held Ben back was his refusal to appear so weak in front of the other man. He didn't want Alonzo to think that he couldn't bear it, nor to feel any guiltier than he already did for causing the pain in the first place.

"Is it bleeding again?"

"A little bit, but that's okay. It'll help clean out the last of the dirt. There's just one more deep one like this. Then we'll get the rest of you clean. You'll feel better, then." Alonzo dipped the rag in the warm water, swishing it around the bucket, and returned it to Ben's back. Lower, closer to his waistband. "So...what do you do when you get lonely?"

Thankfully, Alonzo wasn't going after the other deep one just yet. He was taking his time, soothing Ben again with his long, slow swipes across his skin. Each stroke lulled Ben into loosening another knot in his muscles, and his shoulders lowered to match.

"There's a trail that runs along the edge of my land that goes straight into town. Sometimes, some of the other ranchers will stop in at my place to get fresh water or rest. Or I'll go into town to get supplies. Mrs. Brinkley at the mercantile always invites me to stay for dinner."

"What is this?" Alonzo traced a familiar shape that went over Ben's ribs. "Is it a scar?"

"Got in a fight with one of my mother's crocks when I was four." Ben grinned. "The pot won. And I wasn't allowed near her cooking again for over three years."

"And..." Alonzo's finger found a new path, moving in an

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irregular circle just below Ben's arm. "A little birthmark here."

The muscle beneath the skin rippled. Alonzo's touch was light, hardly there at all, yet Ben felt every place their bodies made contact, even if it was just a fingertip's worth. The birthmark wasn't large, about the size of an acorn, and only slightly darker than the shade of his skin. He was a little surprised Alonzo had seen it at all, but even more frustrated that he had. It would be easier to deny his attraction to the other man if he would just stop touching him.

"How many more do we have to clean out?" he asked, hoping to distract Alonzo.

"Oh...um...there's just one more deep one here." His finger disappeared, and then the heated rag draped over his skin again. The pain from before had dimmed to a dull throb, but it came flaring back as soon Alonzo began teasing out the dirt and grit. Like before, Alonzo murmured his apologies, but they did little to combat the sharp heat slicing across his spine.

Pain was an excellent antidote to arousal, though. While he buried his face in his arms and braced his body against the licks of fire cutting through him, his erection disappeared, as did the memory of Alonzo's tender touch along his ribs and side. He simply wanted this to be over.

By the time Alonzo blew across his skin again, Ben's muscles ached from the tense way he held himself still. A corresponding pounding settled behind his eyeballs, and he didn't move when he felt Alonzo sit back.

"Tell me we're done."

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“We’re done. Is there anything I can do to make you feel better? Would you like some wine?”

“Later. I think...” He turned his head and finally opened his eyes, though it seemed to take too much effort to do so. “I’d like to rest if that’s all right.”

“That’s more than all right.” Alonzo wiped a dry rag across the bottom of Ben’s back, collecting the drops of water gathered there. He pushed himself out of the kneeling position and rose to his feet, his knees popping with the effort. “You should probably sleep, if you can.”

Ben nodded, but as Alonzo turned away to take care of the rags and water, he murmured, “Thank you.”

“I hope that means you don’t hate me for tormenting you,” Alonzo said lightly.

“No.” His lids were heavy again. Sleep was sounding better and better. “And it wasn’t torment.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Never.”

His eyes drifted shut. Alonzo’s dark gaze followed him into his dreams.

CHAPTER 4

Alonzo didn't want to leave the room, and he didn't want to risk waking Ben from his much needed nap, so he settled at the table with his Bible and his copy of *Paradise Lost*. He normally enjoyed a quiet afternoon of reading and reflection, but Ben's sleeping form regularly distracted him from the pages, and from his own thoughts. Ben stayed on his stomach, his head pillowed on folded arms, his face slack and peaceful. Unlike when he was awake. Then it was lined with pain that Ben either couldn't or wouldn't acknowledge.

He hoped that Cullen's whip wouldn't leave any permanent damage on Ben's smooth back. He hated the thought of something beautiful being damaged, and he could

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admit to himself that there was genuine beauty in Ben's body. Even the flaws—like the birthmark and the scar—only accentuated the smooth skin, the perfect slope of his spine, the muscles in his shoulders. But even if the marks did scar, it wouldn't take anything away from Ben.

Ben slept deeply. He didn't move or murmur. He didn't snore. He slept like a man who hadn't given himself the chance to simply be—like a man who was completely comfortable and at ease with his surroundings. As the sun crawled across the sky and a fresh thunderstorm gathered in the distance, light from the fire danced across Ben's skin. He looked golden. Alonzo couldn't keep his gaze away.

Ben didn't give any sign of waking at all until lightning turned everything a brief, sizzling blue. The sudden crack of thunder brought Ben to an upright position, his eyes wide.

"It's just a storm," Alonzo said quickly. "Just a new thunderstorm."

Ben's nostrils flared. Captured in the orange glow of the flames, he could have been a wild animal, cornered and preparing to strike at its attacker. The feral beauty of his heritage etched in every line of his sharp face, and his utter immobility sent Alonzo's heart racing.

A minute passed. As the charge in the air slowly dissipated, Ben just as slowly relaxed, though his head remained high and his eyes solemn.

"It's night. How long have I slept?"

"All day. I didn't wake you because I thought you could use the rest."

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The information erased another taut line in his shoulders, and they dropped to a more natural set. “Might I have some water, please? My throat is very dry.”

“Of course.”

Alonzo dipped a ladle into the bucket, then brought it to Ben, water spilling from the dipper onto the floor. Ben took it with obvious gratitude, his mouth opening for the clear liquid before the dipper even reached his lips. After he drank his fill, Alonzo couldn't help but notice the drops clinging to the corner of Ben's mouth.

“Do you want supper?”

“Have you eaten already?”

“No. I haven't been hungry.”

“Then I can wait as well.”

“Do you feel better?” Alonzo replaced the dipper and returned to his chair. “You look better.” And Alonzo thought he should know, since he'd spent so much time staring at the younger man.

“Yes, resting helped.” He rubbed at his face, scrubbing away the last vestiges of sleep. The dangling chain bumped against his chin, eliciting a scowl. “It'll be good to get home and get these off. I have tools that will help me with the locks.”

“I'm sorry I don't have anything for those.” Especially since he couldn't use the lack as an excuse to keep Ben there for just a little bit longer. They were safe in the old presidio. Alonzo could pretend that Cullen and his band of misfits and thieves didn't even exist. “When do you plan to return home?”

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Ben weighed his response. "I'd like to go tomorrow night. If Cullen has men waiting for me, it will be safer to return by dark. Nobody knows my land like I do."

"What will you do if there are men waiting?"

"Do you really wish to know?"

"Do you wish not to tell me?"

"I don't want you to feel compromised." Carefully, Ben stood up and stretched. His long body became even longer, his sinuous muscles carved out of beautiful bronzed skin. Alonzo swallowed and tore his gaze away before Ben realized he was staring again. "If there are men waiting, I need to get rid of them. If that means they die, then so be it."

"I'm not an innocent, despite the collar," Alonzo said softly. "And I'm not a pacifist, either. A man has a right to defend his own home, and his life."

"Doesn't one of your commandments say thou shalt not kill?"

Alonzo lifted the corner of his mouth. "Yes. But it's a slightly more complicated thing than that. Was your father Catholic?"

"That's how he was raised, yes. And he told me many of the stories, but my mother told me just as many of hers." He began to wander around the room, his footsteps silent. "They wished me to form my own opinions."

Alonzo wondered if that meant Ben had never been baptized. If his father was truly concerned about his son's soul, he would have insisted on it. On the other hand, his mother could have protested, and Alonzo had the feeling that

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her wishes would have been honored above God's commandments.

"The commandment not to kill can be interpreted as you shall not murder. That's how it reads in the original Hebrew. Self-defense and accidental killings are not defined as murder."

Danger glinted in Ben's eyes before they passed into shadow and out of Alonzo's view. "There would be nothing accidental about these."

"But they would be self-defense. Or are you going to tell me that you would kill unprovoked?"

"Is it self-defense if the mistake they've made is work for Cullen?" Ben paused at the window and stared out into the darkness. "I'll do whatever I have to, to keep what's mine. And I sincerely hope Cullen doesn't have men ready to claim my land. But I'm ready to kill them if that's what it takes."

"I'm not going to be the one to stop you," Alonzo said. Another flash of lightning illuminated Ben's face. For a brief second, his eyes glowed. "Because I don't want to find you hanging from another tree. If they catch you a second time, they're not going to string you up by your feet."

"No, they won't." Ben sighed. "I wish Cullen hadn't taken my shoes. All this rain will not make the walk home pleasant."

"If it doesn't rain tomorrow, the ground will be dry by tomorrow night. And if not, you can ride Angelica."

The offer drew his attention back to Alonzo. Oddly enough, his eyes still looked like they were glowing. "I couldn't ask that of you."

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“Why not?”

“Because it’ll be dangerous.”

“It’ll be dangerous for you to go on your own,” Alonzo countered.

“But the danger is mine to own. It’s my land Cullen is after.”

“I have my own issues with the man. I already told you that I would like to help you.”

He waited for more arguments. He had long ago surmised Ben’s independence might be at least partially contributable to his loneliness. Pride had a way of isolating the best of men, whether they intended it to or not. So Ben’s nod came as a surprise. A welcome one.

“Thank you.” He turned back to the window, his shoulders straight, the bandages stark against his skin. “It’s good to have an ally. There have been times when I wondered if I was foolish for fighting him.”

“It’s never foolish to fight evil. God does His work through man.” Alonzo rose and moved to stand behind Ben, following the other man’s gaze across the flat land. The charge in the air made the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand on end. “I know you don’t see it that way.”

“But you do. And I don’t judge people based on what they believe. My parents taught me that by example.”

“Your parents sound like they were good people.” Alonzo folded his arms, less than an inch separating him from Ben’s back. In the dim light, the edges of the wounds looked better. Like they were already healing. “You must be very lonely

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without them.”

“The house is too quiet.” The admission was almost a whisper between them. Perhaps Ben might not believe in Alonzo’s collar, but his status as confessor seemed to be easily accepted. “And I...cannot have the company I wish for very often.”

“What sort of company do you mean? If you are seeking companionship, it shouldn’t be hard for a young man like yourself to find a wife.”

“I don’t think I’d wish that on any woman.”

“What wouldn’t you wish on any woman? A young, strong man, with a good house, a good plot of land, and the means to care for her and a family?”

His soft snort steamed the glass for a moment. “A wife deserves to be cherished and loved. I could do neither.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying you’re incapable of love? Because I wouldn’t believe that for a moment.”

“You don’t know me, Father. Though I’m grateful you think well of me.”

“I’d like to know you. Or to know you better. Why can’t you cherish a wife?”

Ben shifted, though only to turn away from the window and face Alonzo rather than walk back to the pallet. His eyes had gone darker in his contemplations of the storm, and there was a faint stain in his cheeks that had not been there when he’d awakened. Alarm shot through Alonzo. It didn’t bode well if Ben suffered from fever.

“The truth will change your opinion of me,” he said. “And

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I regard you too highly to risk tainting that.”

“You seem to have an entire catalogue of preconceptions about me and my responses. Have I behaved the way you have expected?”

Ben’s mouth twitched. “Well, no. You’re far more stubborn than I would have expected.”

“You haven’t even seen how stubborn I can be.”

The twitch became a definite cant. “I almost hope that’s a promise.”

“It will be if you keep avoiding my questions.”

“I answered the one about your behavior.”

“If you believe that I’ll judge you, or that I’ll think less of you, then there’s nothing more I can do about that.” Alonzo turned from the window and crossed to the fire.

Ben didn’t follow. He chose instead to start wandering around the room again, much as he had done that morning while Alonzo prepared breakfast. It gave Alonzo the opportunity to watch him, the play of the shadows against the sculpted muscles. Ben belonged outside, on his land, not cooped up in a tiny presidio. He would not last much longer behind these walls.

“I’m not like most of the men I know,” Ben said. “I don’t usually care too much about that. But you...somehow, you are different.”

“Different how?”

His shrug could have been slight because of his reluctance to answer, or the injuries on his back. Alonzo wasn’t sure which.

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“You cut me down from that tree without even asking what I’d done to deserve it in the first place. That says a lot about a man.”

“So why don’t you trust me?”

He posed the question as Ben passed nearby. He didn’t expect Ben to stop and come back, to crouch down in front of him and fold his hand over Alonzo’s on the poker. Gently, he guided the tool back to its place on the hearth, pulling Alonzo’s hand off before letting him go.

“Tell me if you still wish the truth when I do this.” Ben cupped Alonzo’s face and drew him nearer, tilting his head to press their mouths together in a soft kiss.

Alonzo froze, stunned by the pressure and texture of Ben’s mouth against his. His heart didn’t beat. His lungs didn’t expand. He didn’t close his eyes. He didn’t pull away, either. He allowed the contact to last for far too long—even a second was far too long. A part of his mind registered how warm Ben’s skin was. And then he thought about how sleek his body looked in the golden light, stretched on Alonzo’s bed, naked, vulnerable.

Alonzo reared back, almost falling in his eagerness to break the contact. “Why did you do that?”

Ben’s mouth glistened in the firelight, but his smile had faded with Alonzo’s retreat. Slowly, he licked his lower lip and swallowed, a bob of his throat that drew Alonzo’s gaze for a shameful moment.

“To prove my point.” Ben straightened slowly, and before he turned away to go back to the window, Alonzo caught a

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glimpse of the bulge in his trousers. “So answer my question, Father. Do you still wish me to tell you why I can’t love a wife?”

“You must know it is grossly inappropriate to...to touch a priest like that.”

“I know priests lead lives of abstinence, yes. My father had a lot of stories about the church of his youth.”

Alonzo wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, though he could still taste Ben’s lips. He knew Ben expected him to condemn him as a sodomite, to threaten and cajole him into repentance, but Alonzo didn’t want to take the expected road. He wanted to figure out why his fingers were trembling and why his tongue felt dry and thick.

“Maybe it’s best if you don’t let that fact slip your mind again.”

“It never actually did in the first place. I simply chose to ignore it for a second.”

The conversation needed to be stopped in its tracks. Diverted to another type of inquiry. But Alonzo couldn’t quite bring himself to do that. “Why?”

“Because you make me wish you weren’t in the church at all.” He took a long, audible breath that made his broad shoulders expand and fill Alonzo’s awareness. “Because I wish I had nerve enough to take more.”

Alonzo would have left and sought sanctuary in the barn if a sharp crack of thunder hadn’t reminded him of the dangers of leaving the room. The last thing he needed was to be struck by lightning.

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“You can’t. I can be your friend. And your confessor if you ever seek one, but nothing more than that.”

Ben’s head bowed. One of the bandages along his spine pulled away from his burnished skin, and Alonzo had to stave off the impulse to go to him and push it back down.

“That is all I could ask for. More than I thought I would get.”

Ben sounded sincere. Alonzo had no reason to doubt him; he didn’t think Ben capable of telling a complete falsehood. He had been reluctant to tell the whole truth at times, but he had never settled on an outright lie to keep Alonzo at arm’s length. He didn’t doubt the other man’s integrity.

“Your...desires don’t preclude having a wife and children. What will happen to your land after you die?”

“Until Cullen tried to kill me, I hadn’t considered my own death at all.” He took the lone chair and straddled it, resting his arms against the back. His eyes became distant and unfocused, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. “I suppose it’s time for me to be practical.”

“Yes. I suppose it is. I guess every man reaches the point where he decides he must be practical and start a family.” Alonzo could have given other reasons for Ben to get married and have kids, but he didn’t want to think about Ben belonging to somebody else. Somebody else he didn’t even want.

“You don’t regret that you’ll never have one?”

“No. No, I never have regretted that. I have a large spiritual family. The only thing that causes me any...sorrow is

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a lack of companionship. Even when I'm living in a town or a city, it's an oddly solitary life."

"Because people look up to you. Set you at a higher standard."

Alonzo inclined his head. "Yes. It's impossible for them to view me as a friend." The conversation seemed to be returning to normal, but Alonzo's pulse still fluttered in his throat.

"I can." Ben picked at some of the rough edges on the chair's back slats. The ends of the broken chains knocked against the wood. He didn't seem nearly as bothered by them now as he had that morning, but then, a man who wasn't adaptable didn't last long in places like this. "I'm sorry about earlier, Father. I hope you don't hold it against me."

"I don't. I accept your apology." Which was the truth, but Alonzo wasn't sure if it was quite accurate. He could forgive Ben easily, but he couldn't stop reliving the contact. Couldn't help but think of what else Ben could do to his body.

"If it'll make you more comfortable, I'll bunk down with Angelica tonight. You can have your bed back at the very least."

"No, absolutely not. For one thing, you're still healing. For another, if you're going to return home tomorrow, you need your rest. I don't want you to risk getting sick out in that rain. You'll sleep on the bed tonight. That's where you belong."

Alonzo's final words drew Ben's eyes back up. They locked on him through the man's lashes, bright and arresting. Glimmers of the fire reflected in their dark depths, but for a split second, they looked like they'd been lit from within.

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“I’d rather not. I’ll sleep on the floor if you insist, but it would make me uncomfortable to be back on the bed. Please don’t insist.”

Alonzo didn’t want to see Ben on the floor. But he didn’t want the other man to walk out and head to the barn, or worse, head to his home in the dark and the rain. “Fine. The floor if you’re going to be stubborn about it.”

Ben’s gaze softened, and his shoulders relaxed. “Thank you. I think I might be ready for something to eat now, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.” Alonzo straightened and began the familiar routine of preparing supper. Though everything seemed normal on the surface, Alonzo feared things between the two of them would never be quite normal again. And that just made him realize how much he needed Ben—simply because there was nobody else like him.

CHAPTER 5

Alonzo's prediction had been mostly correct. Once the rains stopped and the sun came out, the earth drank in all the water and opened its maw for more, ever thirsty, ever hungry in this forbidding country. When they went out at sunset, most of Ben's steps remained firmly on the surface, with only the occasional one sinking deeper into spongy dirt.

In spite of Alonzo's arguments, Ben insisted they leave Angelica behind. "If Cullen does have men waiting for me, we can't risk her announcing our arrival. I know if I ask you to be quiet, you will. With a donkey? I consider myself lucky if I can get her to move in the direction I want."

He was grateful when Alonzo conceded. The day had been

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filled with odd tensions, brought on by the priest's incessant pressing on Ben's need for a wife. He hadn't meant to be as blunt as he'd been with the kiss, but Alonzo's nearness made it difficult to keep his thoughts straight. His dreams had been plagued with ghostly images of Alonzo's hands washing his body, seeking out different marks, different injuries, all in the quest for knowledge. Dream Ben had been bound in chains, unable to tell Alonzo to stop, unwilling to make him.

Though he had known Alonzo would react the way he had, that didn't quell Ben's disappointment at being rebuffed. Part of him had hoped their mutual loneliness might bond them in more ways than friendship, even if another part recognized the desire as ridiculous. The man had given up all pleasures of the flesh completely for his collar. Ben's exposure to the clergy might have been limited, perhaps colored too darkly by his father's experiences, but he knew enough to be aware of that, even without Alonzo's reminder afterward. Ben knew he should consider himself fortunate that Alonzo hadn't condemned him on sight as a deviant. But that still didn't erase the regret that nothing would happen between them.

They walked in silence through the cool night, Alonzo leading the way to the tributary they could follow to Ben's land. One thing Alonzo had not yielded on was the need for Ben to wear a shirt.

"You'll be too cold without one," he'd said. "I only wish I could offer you shoes as well."

So did Ben. But it would be days still before his ankles were healed enough to tolerate wearing them again.

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“You have to learn this path,” he said, breaking the silence of the past hour. “My invitation to you will always stand.”

“I’ll remember it,” Alonzo promised. “I have a great deal to teach you, after all.”

“I think you’ll be the one reading to me more often than the other way around.” He liked that possibility. Alonzo’s voice resonated in a place deep inside Ben’s gut, something primal and basic to cling to. “I wasn’t the best of students.”

“Oh? I don’t think that’s true,” Alonzo said mildly. “Not in any real sense.”

“Oh, it was. I was always getting distracted. I liked being outside better than in.”

“That doesn’t mean you were a poor student. That means that you were interested in learning different lessons. Not everybody can run a large piece of land completely by themselves. I would guess that most people can’t. But now it’s time to be more...rounded.”

“And you? What lessons can I give you in exchange for teaching me how to read better?”

“I’m not sure. What skills do you have that I need to learn?”

Ben bit his tongue to hold back his first instinctive response. It wasn’t worth tarnishing their friendship even further by suggesting anything remotely carnal. The darkness masked his rising arousal from the other man’s eyes, but the fact that Ben knew was more than enough to make answering Alonzo difficult.

“You do well enough with livestock, so there’s nothing

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there I can teach you. And you found my gardening too fussy for your liking...”

“Not fussy,” Alonzo countered. “Just a bit unnecessary, given the time of the morning and the state of your health. But I think there’s something you can teach me. Your mother’s tongue.”

Ben glanced at him in curiosity. “Why do you wish to know that?”

“Because it’s knowledge that I don’t have. Because it’s a part of who you are.”

“There aren’t many Náizhan still around here. Many died in the wars against the Comanche, and others moved south where it’s safer. Learning the language will do you no good except to speak with me, most likely. Though perhaps other Apache tribes might understand you.”

“Which language are you more comfortable using?”

“A few years ago, I would have said my mother’s tongue. We didn’t use English as much after my father passed away. But then I had to start dealing with the men in town, and I knew not speaking English would work against me.” He gave Alonzo a small smile. “So maybe teaching you will do us both some good. That way, I can assure myself that I won’t lose it.”

“Indeed. Sharing a language is the only way to preserve it. I’m not familiar with the Náizhan. They’re Apache?”

“Yes. You’ve probably heard them called Lipan.”

“Ahh. Yes, I am familiar with them. By reputation. I don’t believe I’ve met anybody from that tribe. Excluding yourself.”

“Neither have I,” Ben confessed. “My mother was outcast

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when she fell in love with my father. All I have of them are her stories.”

“Would you object to sharing her stories with me, as well?”

“On one condition.”

“What?”

“Write ’em down. Don’t let them get lost in case something happens to me.”

“I can do that. I’ll be happy to do that.”

Ben didn’t doubt it. A part of him wanted to start sharing stories right at that moment. His mother had told him so many, and they were in serious danger of being lost forever. But Alonzo wouldn’t let that happen, and for that, Ben was grateful. Even so, he had to push the memories from the front of his mind and focus on where they were and what he was about to do.

He didn’t doubt that Cullen had men waiting for him. Alonzo had assured him that he would act in self-defense, and in defense of Ben, but he knew that he couldn’t count on the priest to instigate an attack. That meant for all intents and purposes, he would be alone in this fight. Ben didn’t mind that. Nobody knew the land like he did. Nobody knew his home. They might have had the advantage when it came to numbers, but he still had the upper hand. If nothing else, he had the element of surprise on his side. Nobody would expect to see him alive, much less strong and able to fight.

He had Father Alonzo to thank for that.

They didn’t stop walking until he saw the outline of his

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house in the distance. All of the windows were lit with unseen lamps. Something in his chest twisted and bile burned his throat.

When Alonzo took a step forward, Ben's arm shot out to block his way. He nodded toward a line of scrub trees north of the house and grasped Alonzo's wrist to start leading him in that direction. After a few feet, he let go. He didn't wish to. He liked the heat seeping into his fingertips, the quick vibration of Alonzo's pulse against his skin. But Alonzo was following of his own volition and leading him was unnecessary.

His gaze jumped from the house to the horizon to the trees in front of him. The cloud-covered sky hid them from easy detection, but that also made it more difficult to see obstacles in their path that might make noise. A lack of shoes helped. He was already stepping lightly to avoid further injury. Once, though, Alonzo stepped on a stick that cracked so viciously, every hair on Ben's body stood up on end.

He saw the outline of a man on the far side of the trees. Keeping hold of the loose chains in his hands, he motioned for Alonzo to crouch low, keeping their silhouettes against the landscape as small as possible. The presence of this one meant there was likely another inside, as well as others scattered across the property. Keeping alert, Ben crept closer, feet silent against the damp ground.

Cullen wouldn't win. He would not let his parents' legacy pass into such an evil man's hands.

Alonzo surprised him. His steps were almost as noiseless as Ben's, his approach nearly as stealthy. Ben wasn't going to

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rely upon his aid, but there was comfort to be taken in knowing that he could, if the need arose.

The man sported a thick beard and moustache, and his belly hung over his belt. A knife glinted in his hand, but he was too busy using it to scrape beneath his fingernails to notice Ben near. Drawing his hands together, Ben grasped each dangling end of the chain, creating a link to unite them into one usable length. He waited until he was almost behind the man before straightening and lifting his arms over his head.

The only sound the man made when Ben wrapped the chain around the front of his throat was a choked gurgle.

The man struggled, trying to break free. He was bigger, and Ben wouldn't be surprised if he was stronger as well, but that wouldn't be enough. Ben had more than physical strength on his side. He pulled the chain tighter and tighter, until his arms strained from the effort and the other man finally stopped moving.

Ben dropped to the ground without a word and searched his pockets, taking the few pieces of silver he found, before turning his attention to the holster. He unbuckled the belt from the man's hips and looped it around his own, relieved by the weight of a gun at his side.

"Hold a moment," Alonzo murmured, dropping to one knee beside the dead body and making the sign of the cross.

Ben took the time to scan the ground in the surrounding area. There was only one set of footprints leading up to the man, and it led straight back toward the house. If there was

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another sentry, the two didn't communicate. For a second, Ben regretted killing the man outright. He should have taken time to interrogate him first.

Nothing changed at the house. Their presence had not been overheard.

"You should stay here and keep an eye out," Ben whispered. "I'm going up to the house."

"No." Alonzo straightened and cast one final look at the prone body. "You might be armed now, but you're still outnumbered."

Ben already recognized that tone in Alonzo's voice. It meant he was not going to be swayed. Ben had no choice but to nod and let Alonzo follow.

His back stung from the sweat dripping down into the healing wounds. Hopefully, there would only be one man inside. He felt more than capable of another physical struggle, but it would be better if he could simply shoot the interloper. But if there was another man on the property, the gunshots would alert him to Ben's presence.

Would he run for town to tell Cullen? Or would he come to the source and try to help?

Ben gambled on the former. Cullen would want to know if something had happened.

He debated briefly detouring for the barn to see how many horses it held. He'd know for sure then how many men he was dealing with. But the barn was on the far side of the house, and it was easily seen from most of the windows. He risked exposure if he did that.

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Ben chose to continue on his path. He would simply try to get some answers out of the man first before killing him.

At the corner of the house, he shimmied against the wall to the nearest window and peered inside. Two men sat at the front table, playing cards. A third was sprawled along the length of the pallet near the fireplace, his hat over his face and his hands folded over his stomach.

Three men.

He only had one gun.

Ben swore under his breath.

"I'll distract them," Alonzo said from behind his shoulder.

"What?" Ben whipped his head around. "No."

"Shh. Listen. They're not going to do anything to me if I knock on the door. While I'm at the front, you sneak in from the back."

"What if I have to shoot? How are you going to stay out of the way?"

Alonzo smiled. "I'll have to trust you not to aim at me."

He didn't like it. Not one little bit. He wasn't worried so much about his bullets as he was Cullen's men. There was no way to predict what they were going to do.

But he could safely predict Alonzo would insist until he got his way or they got caught. At least if Ben caved on this one issue, they stood a chance of getting the house back without either one of them getting hurt. If Cullen's men found them...

"Promise you won't try anything with them," he hissed.

"I'm a man of God, my son." Alonzo gestured in the

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darkness. “And I’ve lost my way. I’m just looking for a bit of shelter for the night.” With that, he backed away, not giving Ben another chance to protest before he rounded the corner of the house and disappeared from sight.

Ben swore again. He’d never forgive himself if something happened to Alonzo. Decent men like him deserved better. But now he didn’t have a choice, and he slithered along the wall to get to the back door.

Distantly, he heard Alonzo’s knock. Ben pulled the gun from the holster and cocked it. He had no choice now but to shoot. Cullen’s men wouldn’t hesitate to fire, but he could only hope his quick draw was faster than any of theirs.

“What the hell do you want?” The man’s voice boomed, and it was clear he wasn’t pleased to see Alonzo.

“Hello. I’m looking for the man who lives here.”

“I’m the man who lives here.”

“I thought a man named Ben McKinnon lived here.”

Ben didn’t need to see the sneer. He could hear it just fine, even from the back of the house. “He doesn’t no more. What business do you have here, padre?”

“I told you. I’m seeking Ben McKinnon. What have you done with him?”

Harsh laughter answered him. Ben’s skin crawled as he inched out of the storage room and into the pantry. By staying close to the wall, he could see into the main room without being noticed, but he couldn’t see all of the men in the room. The one who had been asleep in front of the fire now had the hat pushed off his face, though he had yet to rise. He saw the

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backside of another, but Alonzo and the other man were completely out of his view.

He slipped a knife from the block next to the stores. There were six shots in the gun, but it was never a bad idea to have more weapons than necessary. He was better with a knife, too.

A thud made Ben stiffen. He darted forward, uncaring of the noise he might make, to see Alonzo pinned to the wall by a man nearly twice as broad as him.

“Sheriff put you out on that presidio for a reason, padre,” the man said. “Looks to me you didn’t learn your lesson.”

Alonzo didn’t look away from the taller man, and his voice remained even. “Cullen never told me I couldn’t visit my sheep. What have you done with Ben?”

The man on the pallet barked with laughter. “McKinnon’s a sheep now. Maybe we should’ve shorn him, too.”

“Shut up, Joe.” Though he’d snapped at his buddy, the man holding Alonzo focused his annoyance on the priest, a meaty fist slamming into Alonzo’s ribs. Joe chortled from his perch, and though Alonzo grunted from the blow, he didn’t show any other sign of weakness. Not even when his captor landed two more solid punches.

Alonzo might have hit his knees, except that the man still held him against the wall. His other hand closed around Alonzo’s throat, and he lifted the priest off the floor, squeezing until Alonzo’s face started to turn purple and his eyes began to bulge.

“You know what I think? I think the boss will be more than happy to get you off his back. I think he might even give

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me a raise. But between you and me..." The man leaned in closer, blocking Ben's view of Alonzo's face. "I pretty much just want to kill you."

There was no time left. Ben inched closer to the nearest man. No one had yet to notice him. He avoided the loose floorboard that would have creaked under his weight and took another step. When he lifted the gun to aim, however, one of the chain links scraped against another.

He fired just as all heads whipped in his direction. His target stumbled backward from the force of the blast, crimson blossoming across the front of his dingy shirt.

Afraid of accidentally hitting Alonzo, Ben pointed at the man called Joe and pulled the trigger. The shocked look on his face might have been comical in other circumstances. Blood bloomed over his shirt and sprayed from his mouth.

With Alonzo in such close proximity to the last standing man, Ben knew the gun would be worthless. Holstering it, he leapt forward and grabbed the man's shoulders, wrenching him away. Alonzo gasped for breath, but their eyes met for only a moment before Ben tackled his quarry to the floor. He was outweighed and outmuscled, but he had the advantage of being on top for enough seconds to get his knife back into his hand.

He yanked the man's head up by his greasy hair and slit his throat. The growls of anger immediately ceased.

Ben didn't have to look up to know what Alonzo was doing. Even though the words were winded, the prayer was unmistakable. He felt a quick stab of annoyance. But it wasn't

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Alonzo's automatic praying that bothered him—it was the sharp streaks of pain stretching from his neck to his lower back. The pain was followed by a hot, slow trickle of blood crawling down his ribs.

Alonzo bent and took Ben by the arm, then hauled him to his feet. Blood covered the floor, still flowing freely from the bodies.

“You're hurt,” Alonzo murmured.

“But alive.” He scanned the room. “We need to get rid of them.”

“We do. Do you have sheets? We can drag them outside for now.”

Ben went back into the storage room and rummaged around for what spare sheeting he could. There wasn't much, and it took multiple trips to get all three bodies out the front door and off to the side of the house, but within minutes they were gone, leaving behind the stained floor as the only evidence.

“I'll fetch water so we can scrub everything clean.” He kept his eyes away from the pallet by the fireplace. He didn't want the memory of Joe's blood mingling with the ones he had of his mother doing her leatherwork at the hearth. “And I'll check the barn. Make sure there isn't another one out there waiting for us.”

“No. Your back...you're going to make it worse if you don't rest. The last thing you need is to cause permanent damage, or get an infection. I'll take care of all this. You go upstairs.”

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Though Ben didn't like it, Alonzo was right. More of his injuries had opened with the tasks of moving the bodies. The lower part of his borrowed shirt was stuck to his skin. If he didn't shed it soon, it would dry like that and they'd be forced to open the cuts all over again just to get the shirt off. He could work without it now, but the resolve in Alonzo's face said he wasn't going to budge from this decision anyway.

Ben closed his hand on Alonzo's wrist. "I only have two horses. If there's more than six in the barn, come get me. I'm not letting you face another of Cullen's men on your own."

"I won't try to face anybody on my own." Alonzo covered the back of Ben's hand and offered a small smile. "I might believe in God's protection, but that doesn't mean I'm going to do anything foolish. Go upstairs. I'll tend to your back as soon as I get this mess cleaned up."

He nodded, more weary than he had realized. He sincerely hoped Cullen had thought four was enough to safeguard the land. The prospect of collapsing in his bed was too enticing to ignore.

CHAPTER 6

By the time Alonzo reached the second floor, everything ached. His shoulders ached from dragging the bodies and scrubbing the floors. His ribs ached from the harsh series of blows he had received. The area behind his eyes throbbed. Normally, he would do what he could for his own injuries, pray for strength and a relief from the pain, and pass out. But now, all Alonzo wanted to do was return to Ben. Nothing else mattered, except reaching the other man, being near him, touching him to prove that they were both there. Both still alive.

Ben's home was surprisingly large and spacious, one of the most comfortable places Alonzo had visited since his

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arrival from Spain. There were several closed doors along the corridor on the second floor, but it wasn't difficult to find Ben. He had left his bedroom door open, and even from the hallway, Alonzo could see Ben's body, long and firm on his bed, bathed in golden light from the lamp burning beside him.

"There was nobody in the barn," Alonzo said softly as he stepped into the room. "I think everything will be quiet for the rest of the night."

Ben's shoulders sagged as if he'd been holding himself at the ready in case he had to get up again. As he shifted on the double bed, his hands slid out from beneath the pillow, bereft of the manacles that had bound him for the last few days.

"I found my tools to open the locks," Ben explained at Alonzo's curious glance. "I wasn't looking forward to spending another night with them chafing my wrists."

"That's good." Alonzo set down the jug of water he had carried up and stripped off his cassock, leaving him in his shirtsleeves. After a moment of consideration, he removed his collar and unbuttoned his shirt as well. Once he was finished with Ben, he would need to inspect his own injuries. "This water is going to be a bit cold. Do you mind?"

"No, do what you must." Ben's dark eyes never wavered as Alonzo dipped his rag into the jug. There was a mild flinch when Alonzo made contact with the worst of the blood, but other than that, Ben remained stoic. "How do you feel?"

"I'll be fine. I'd probably be feeling a lot worse if you weren't such a quick shot."

Slowly, Ben straightened his arm. His fingertips brushed

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over the bruises already forming on Alonzo's abdomen, each touch hotter than the last. "I'm sorry you got hurt at all."

"I know. I am, too, honestly." The soft touches continued, and Alonzo knew he should stop it, but he just didn't have the energy. "I knew what I was risking when I knocked on the door." As he washed the blood away, he was relieved to see the skin wasn't further torn. The scabs had been re-opened, but they would heal over again. As long as Ben didn't push himself.

"It looks like I owe you even more than I did." With one last skim over Alonzo's stomach, Ben finally lowered his hand, though his eyes kept flickering back to it afterward. "You have to stay here until you're feeling better. My back will be better in the morning. I can wait on you for a change."

"You don't need to wait on me. Nothing's broken. I just hope we have a few days before Cullen decides to come out here to check on his boys."

The corner of Ben's mouth lifted. "You know, you're in my home now. You shouldn't be so stubborn about accepting hospitality."

"Oh, I think that gives me more reason to be stubborn," Alonzo said lightly. "Perhaps tomorrow morning, I'll wake up bright and early and scrub down the entire house."

Ben's laughter rocked his upper body, jarring the path of the damp rag. "You are never going to let me forget about the weeds, are you?"

"No, probably not." Alonzo wiped away the dry streaks of blood, washing the skin until not a single hint of the dark red

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remained. He hoped he never had to do this again. He was tired of the way Ben's dark skin looked beneath even darker blood.

When he went to rinse and wet the rag a final time, Ben caught his wrist. He had done so earlier, and Alonzo had done his best to ignore the physical contact, but in the dim light of his bedroom, with his body bare and burnished in front of Alonzo, doing so was much more difficult. Strength still seeped from the man's fingers, and his flesh burned where it ringed Alonzo's own. Alonzo could barely catch his breath, but the energy to pull away escaped him.

"I'm fine. Please. See to yourself. You spend far too much time looking after others and not enough for yourself, Alonzo."

"I'm going to see to myself, but only because your back is clean." His agreement was enough to make Ben release him, but the memory of the hot fingers remained imprinted around his wrist. He pushed himself off the bed and peeled his shirt from his shoulders. "I don't think it's anything a bit of rest won't fix."

"The least I can do is give you the best bed." Carefully, Ben sat up, holding his back stiffly. "Take mine. I'll sleep in front of the fire."

"No. You've been sleeping on the floor for the past two nights. If anybody deserves to sleep in his own bed tonight, it's you."

Ben remained perched on the edge of the mattress. "Stay here then. It's big enough for two. And you deserve a good

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night's rest as much as I do."

Alonzo hesitated. It would be best for him to go downstairs and put the entire house between them. Not because he didn't want to be near Ben—he very much wanted to be near Ben. That was the problem. On the other hand, he was so tired, so sore, so exhausted after the rush of fear and violence, he just wanted to collapse in a comfortable bed and turn himself over to sleep for a few hours. And Ben being beside him would make that easier.

"Okay. I don't think I can turn down a real bed."

Ben eased back to his prone position, leaving more than ample room for Alonzo to get in on the other side. He watched every step of Alonzo's disrobing, the shedding of his shirt, the stripping of his shoes and socks. Though he still wore his trousers when he came around the end of the bed, he felt naked under Ben's tender scrutiny. His skin pinked long before he slid under the blankets, but the welcome of the soft mattress surpassed any of his unease.

The bed shifted when Ben leaned over and extinguished the lamp. Darkness embraced both of them, and Ben's soft sigh drifted over.

"I think we should be safe from Cullen for a few days, at least," he said. "Time enough to decide what to do next."

Alonzo was intensely aware of the body next to him, but for the moment, he was completely overwhelmed by the almost decadent comfort of the full mattress. "Yes, and we have the advantage here. I can see why this place is worth fighting for...or dying for."

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“You’ll likely grow tired of hearing me say so, but thank you. Again. I have to admit I’ve never known a man like you.”

“I’ve never known anybody like you, either. And you don’t have to keep thanking me.”

“I do. You’ve done more for me than people in town I’ve known for years. And I’m shamed to think I judged you so falsely at the first.”

“No. Don’t be ashamed. I doubt I would be the most trusting person if I were in your shoes.”

“But we’re friends now, right?” He almost sounded shy, younger even than his years. Like he feared Alonzo’s answer might possibly be negative. “I don’t have many friendships. I would treasure yours. I swear to it.”

“Of course, we’re friends. Do you have any reason to doubt it?”

“If you say we are, then no. But I know I’ve asked a lot of you these past few days. And I’ve...made you uncomfortable once or twice. You would have every right to leave tomorrow and never come back.”

“You haven’t asked anything of me that I wouldn’t have offered freely. And as for making me uncomfortable...” Alonzo paused, unsure of where to go from there. He wished Ben hadn’t brought that up at all. He wished that the memory of the brief caress wasn’t still burned in his mind and on his lips. “I don’t know, Ben. I just...don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” The words were a whisper, hanging there between them with a soft taunt. “Whether or not you can still be my friend because of it?”

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“No, it’s not that. It’s nothing like that. It’s more...I don’t know what to think about it. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Oh.” He felt the single word as a caress across his bare shoulder, and glanced out of the corner of his eye to see the slight glow of Ben’s as he regarded Alonzo. “I guess I should confess that I haven’t been able to, either. To stop thinking about it, I mean.”

“I think it’s been on my mind so much because nobody...nobody has ever kissed me. I was close to somebody before, at the university. He was a bit like you. Stubborn and proud.” Alonzo spoke haltingly, unsure of what he was going to say until the words left his mouth. “But even he never kissed me.”

The faint brush against his arm could have been an accident if it wasn’t repeated almost immediately afterward. Fingertips. Rough. Warm. Barely there at all, just like the touches along his bruises. But they were there enough for Alonzo to feel each and every one of them.

“I admire his restraint. I only knew you a day before I gave in to the desire to do so.”

“I don’t know what his restraint would have been without a healthy amount of fear. Spain isn’t like here...here there’s nobody around for miles. Nobody to notice.” Alonzo took a shaky breath and remained still, letting Ben continue touching him. “Not that it should make any sort of a difference, if somebody is watching or not.”

“Do you fear it, too?” His fingertips glided higher, tickling along the inside of Alonzo’s elbow. “Did you ever think about

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what it would be like to kiss someone before I did so?"

"I wondered. Who isn't curious about that sort of thing? Especially when it's put out of reach at such a young age. And I do fear what will happen if...if it happens again."

"You said you didn't wish it to happen again." Ben fell silent. Was he nearer? Had the mattress moved? Alonzo's senses felt over stimulated and untrustworthy. "Was that the truth?"

"It shouldn't happen again." Which wasn't an answer at all, but the only thing Alonzo could say. It felt like ants were climbing up and down his back, and tension made his shoulders ache anew.

"Shouldn't isn't the same thing as won't." The fingers disappeared from his arm, and Alonzo almost exhaled in relief. Then they returned, this time along his sore ribs, tracing along the line, back and forth, at the same soothing tempo he'd used earlier. "Did I tell you, you are one of the most beautiful men I have ever seen? I find myself watching you even when I know you'd rather I not."

"Ben..." This didn't need to be so hard. He knew how to pull away from temptation. He knew how to shield himself and knew how to pray. Except that for a horrible moment, he hadn't just believed he would die. He *knew* he was going to die. And his last thoughts weren't of God or of the Virgin. They had been of Ben. "You're right. Shouldn't isn't the same as won't. I can only say it shouldn't happen."

"Can I say I would like it to?" There was no mistaking it this time; Ben was closer. Now, Alonzo felt the heat

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emanating from his bare chest as his hand moved lower. It trailed along his waist, along the line of his pants. Back. Forth. Just as lulling. Even more dangerous. “Loneliness is a burden we shouldn’t have to bear on our own. I know you feel it wearing on you. It doesn’t have to be that way.”

It *did* have to be that way. Because that was the life he had chosen. Ben could be his friend. Ben could be his student and his teacher. Ben could even be the closest thing to a partner he would ever have. But that was all he could do. Alonzo couldn’t indulge in carnal desires to fight off loneliness. He *knew* that. But his body didn’t want to listen. His heart didn’t want to listen.

His silence seemed to be the answer Ben was seeking. Though his hand never stopped moving, Ben bent his neck forward, gliding his lips along the line of Alonzo’s bare shoulder. His breath was hotter than Alonzo remembered, his mouth softer. It traveled over the slope and to his upper arm before turning back and tracing the same path back.

“I feared for you when I saw you pinned to the wall,” Ben said. “I reacted without thinking. I couldn’t let them hurt you. Even if it meant taking their anger onto myself.”

“I was scared, too. Cullen’s been in my face before, but even he wouldn’t openly harm a priest.” Alonzo’s breath froze as Ben continued his slow kisses over his shoulder. His groin was tight. He knew he would have a stronger response if Ben continued. “But I knew you wouldn’t let anything happen to me.”

“I wouldn’t.” His mouth was at Alonzo’s neck now, his

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arm resting more heavily across Alonzo's midsection. It pressed Ben's chest firmly against Alonzo's arm, a weight both terrifying and tantalizing. "I will never let anything hurt you, Alonzo. Even if it meant stopping because you wished me to."

Alonzo didn't wish him to stop. Each small kiss sent a much larger shockwave through his body, stunning him with its power. The motion of Ben's lips against Alonzo's throat as he spoke was almost as intoxicating as the kisses themselves. His world was becoming limited to Ben. Nothing before him. Nothing after.

"Ben...you're making me weak."

"That's the way it's supposed to be." His lips parted. The tip of his tongue danced upward, to Alonzo's jaw and back closer to his ear. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

Alonzo closed his eyes. Everything inside of him that wasn't tight felt like it had turned to some sort of mush. He didn't know if he would call his reaction joy, but it certainly wasn't unpleasant. "I...yes...I think so."

"I am, too." The confession came directly in his ear now, hotter, faster, closer than anything Alonzo had ever felt before. Ben circled along his navel, and slowly, deliberately, slid his palm lower until it molded over Alonzo's arousal. "I only wish to give you pleasure. Please let me."

Alonzo's answer came without thought. There was no weighing and debating. No more hesitation and questioning. He just spoke. "Yes."

Ben caught the earlobe between his teeth, nibbling lightly

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as his hand tightened over Alonzo's prick. Never had Alonzo thought such an insignificant place on his body as his ear, such a tiny appendage, could create such an array of fiery sensation through his body. Shivers raced along his spine, while individual flames licked down his chest. At his sides, his hands clenched into fists, only to unclench again when Ben released his ear and kissed the soft skin below it.

"Have you done this before?" Alonzo's lips barely moved to form the question.

"Yes. A few times." He squeezed along Alonzo's erection, the side of his hand nudging against the tight sac. "Is there anything in particular you'd like?"

"I...I have no idea. I've never done this."

"But you've touched yourself, haven't you? In the dark, maybe. At night in bed. When something gnawed at your belly, and the only way you could let it out was to take yourself in hand..."

"No. I mean...I know what you're talking about. But no, I never have."

"May I?" His hand hovered above Alonzo's groin, the absence stabbing deeper than he would have anticipated. "I would like to kiss you again, too, though I know you probably don't want that."

Alonzo almost felt like laughing, though he thought the urge stemmed more from the tension than any genuine amusement. "Why wouldn't I want you to kiss me?"

"You stopped me before." Ben shifted his body, rolling more onto his side as he propped his head up on his hand to

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gaze down upon Alonzo. “And the others I’ve been with...they won’t let me. Kissing is different than touching, they say. Kissing is...closer.”

“If I’m...if we’re going to do this...” And there was no if, Alonzo knew. This was happening, and he wasn’t going to stop it. “Then I want to be close to you. I want it...” Alonzo paused, frustrated with his inability to find the right words. He was fluent in three languages. He had read the greatest poets in every one of those languages. He had access to words, but they were lost now. He reached for Ben’s hand and gripped his fingers, pulling gently. “I only want to be close to you.”

Ben tangled their fingers briefly, before drawing Alonzo’s hand to his chest. He pressed it flat, holding his own over it to encourage Alonzo to keep it there. Alonzo’s body tightened. Every thud of Ben’s heart echoed into him. Strong. Steady. Quickening the longer Alonzo touched him.

After several seconds, Ben released him, stretching to cup the side of Alonzo’s face. He licked his lips until they glistened in the darkness, and just as carefully as he’d touched him, Ben leaned down to glide his mouth over Alonzo’s.

Alonzo mimicked him, cupping Ben’s cheek and opening to the kiss. Their tongues touched and he shuddered in response. Ben’s mouth was hot and firm, but Alonzo could tell he was holding back. Perhaps waiting for Alonzo to surrender himself completely before he would feel comfortable enough to relax. Alonzo wanted to offer that surrender, especially as Ben sought out more and more of his mouth. Something that felt more like pain than pleasure cut through him, and his

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prick hardened, becoming fully erect.

More of Ben covered him as the kisses deepened. No longer content with propping himself up, Ben pushed Alonzo back into the mattress, their chests touching, his hand straying back to Alonzo's hip. While his tongue made Alonzo's head swim, his fingers turned the rest of Alonzo to flame, smoldering from embers to sensations he had never known existed. The buttons came free on his trousers. At the touch of Ben's rough skin along the tip of his arousal, Alonzo tore free from the kisses with a cry.

"It's all right," Ben soothed. He reached farther down, drawing the same calluses down Alonzo's shaft. "Just enjoy it."

"I..." Alonzo jerked from the bed, pushing his hips upward. "I...don't know if I can just enjoy it."

"Please. For tonight. You can. You have to trust me."

"I do trust you," Alonzo said quickly. "But everything feels so...too intense."

"Because you're fighting it. Unless..." His hand stilled. The silence between them was deafening, weighing against Alonzo even more than any caress Ben might have given. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No. No, I don't want you to stop. I've never felt anything like this."

"Close your eyes."

He waited until Alonzo had complied. The light pressure of Ben's mouth back on his prompted him to open immediately, to invite Ben in when before his reticence had

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created a barrier to be broken down. Ben resumed his firm, careful touches, until anticipation of where he would squeeze next nearly drove Alonzo mad. He hungered for more, whimpering once when Ben slid his lips down the curve of his throat.

“I’ve wanted to know you since the first time you touched me,” Ben said into his skin. He licked over the throb of Alonzo’s pulse, but when Alonzo expected him to return to their kisses, he chose instead to suck lightly at the sensitive flesh.

Alonzo reached for Ben, seeking some sort of hold on the other man. He tilted his head back, pushing against Ben’s mouth, encouraging him to continue. The tip of his tongue drew the lightest patterns, moving beyond the pulse point to sample the skin at the corner of his jaw, beneath his ear, and then back to his Adam’s apple.

“I don’t know...what should I do?”

“That depends. Do you want to touch me?”

Alonzo had spent a great deal of time touching Ben. He had inspected Ben’s skin, found marks and scars, tested the firmness of his flesh. But this wasn’t the same. Touching him in the darkness would be different.

“Yes.”

His quiet affirmative drew a soft sigh from Ben. He sat up, looming at Alonzo’s side, and worked at his pants until they were on a heap on the floor and his long, glorious body was completely naked to Alonzo’s touch. Grasping Alonzo’s wrist, he guided it to his groin, to the hard length of his prick.

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He only uttered two words.

“Please, Alonzo.”

The strangest feeling washed through him—sharp and golden and hungry. He wanted to make Ben happy. He wanted to give pleasure more than he had ever wanted anything else. But he would be lying to himself if he claimed he wasn’t afraid. He was afraid of that desire, and he was afraid of doing it wrong, and he was afraid of where it would lead.

He slid his fingers over Ben’s thigh, getting up the courage to go beyond that. Ben pushed against his hand, silently encouraging him to keep moving. With a deep breath, he gripped Ben’s length, gasping at the heat and smooth texture.

A shudder wracked through Ben, strong enough to startle Alonzo into stopping. “Don’t,” Ben said, a definite plea in his tone. His hands fumbled with Alonzo’s trousers, awkwardly pushing them down his hips as he struggled not to break the connection with Alonzo’s grip. When they joined Ben’s on the floor, Ben grasped Alonzo’s prick with the same constriction, the same attention, as before.

“Together.” To demonstrate, he began to stroke, sliding the foreskin over the tip when he came all the way to the end, driving the heel of his hand into the sac when he was at the base. He stretched out at Alonzo’s side again to make it easier. “You’ll see. It’s like nothing you’ve ever known.”

Alonzo nodded, seeking out Ben’s mouth again. He needed to taste Ben’s lips again. He needed to feel that reassurance, needed to be soothed even as his body started to shake and tremble. Each stroke of Ben’s wrist only increased

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his tremors and pleasure almost instantly began to build beneath his skin. Everything in his chest started to twist, and he followed Ben's lead, used Ben's rhythm to direct his own wrist.

There was care in Ben's kisses, tenderness in the way his mouth slanted over Alonzo's. He took what Alonzo offered, not with greed but with gratitude, evidenced in every touch of their tongues, every stroke of their hands. Alonzo let his free hand flutter over Ben's chest. The freedom to do so without condemnation nearly undid him, but somehow he remained focused. Until Ben's soft whimpers broke through his resolve.

They were moving toward something, and Alonzo only had a vague understanding of what that might be. For his whole life, he'd strived to keep himself pure, to not give in to any temptations of the flesh. Now that was paying off in ways Alonzo had never expected. The bliss was overwhelming, but the fact that it was Ben who made him feel this way made everything more intense.

Ben was the one who broke the seal of their mouths, his breath ragged and sultry as it fanned across Alonzo's cheek. His hand kept moving, long, sensual slides from base to tip, but the grip felt tighter, impelling Alonzo to match his power. Neither hastened. Their hearts raced fast enough to compensate for the deliberate tempo of their wrists. It was a brushfire surging out of control, but when Ben licked and nibbled along his neck, his rough jaw stippled Alonzo's skin with even more welcome heat.

"I don't think...I can't take much more...Ben...please..."

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Alonzo wasn't even sure what he was begging for. He didn't think Ben was holding anything back from him, but he knew that he was dependent on his friend to ease this wonderful torment.

If Alonzo was uncertain, Ben didn't seem nearly so. The angle of his hand shifted, not much, not enough probably to be seen by the naked eye, but enough for Alonzo to feel, enough for him to know new sensations across his already aching sac when a fingernail scratched it, or to meet each stroke with a rock of his hips, thrusting into the tight circle of Ben's fingers to heighten the friction.

Ben dipped his head to rain kisses on Alonzo's chest. These were different than the others, harder, sharper. They radiated from the center outward, but when he felt the keen edge of teeth sink lightly into his nipple, it finally proved too much.

Alonzo's breath hitched and his head dropped back. A shout wedged in his throat, and he felt himself rushing to the inevitable conclusion. The sound ripped free, and heat poured over him. His cock pulsed in Ben's hand, shooting long strands of liquid onto his thighs and stomach. He shouted again, his body going stiff as wave after wave of unbelievable satisfaction moved through him. His shouts faded to whimpers, and he couldn't bite them back. Even when he stopped shaking.

He was only vaguely aware of Ben's hand leaving his body, but his hooded gaze fell to where it took Alonzo's place on his prick. The fluid coating his fingers now slicked along

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the shaft, moving so swiftly that it made Alonzo dizzy. Ben clutched Alonzo's shoulder, digging into the muscle, and arched away with a shout, his own release splattering across Alonzo's stomach. Alonzo watched, enraptured, while Ben trembled from the force of it. He didn't know how it was possible, but Ben was even more stunning now.

Alonzo didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to say. He was even scared to move. Now he just felt light. Warm. Content. He didn't want to disrupt that contentment. He looped his arm around Ben's waist and pulled him as close as possible.

"Don't move," Alonzo whispered.

"Don't think I can." Ben buried his face in Alonzo's neck. The dance of his lips created a new cascade of shivers to endure. "Thank you. For trusting me."

Alonzo clung to his lover, overwhelmed by what they had just done. By the decision he had just made. "Was it okay? I think...I forgot to do my half of things."

"It was more than okay." The eyes that lifted to his were warm and bright, a smile reaching between them to erase the doubt. "Is it something you would like to try again?"

It felt too good to reject the thought of a second time, even if some of his earlier doubts were creeping up on him again. "Yes. I think so. Being close to you is..."

"Right," Ben finished, though it wasn't exactly what Alonzo had been striving for.

But it would suit for now.

CHAPTER 7

Waking up with a warm body pressed into his side was an entirely new experience for Ben. There had been other men, the occasional wanderer through the land, but none had ever spent more than an hour or two in his home, and never had they crossed his bedroom's threshold. They were merely trysts, encounters meant as physical release and nothing else. Alonzo was the first partner he had ever invited to his bed, the only man he had ever trusted enough to fall asleep next to.

He regarded the fine slope of the man's nose in the soft dawn light. His hands itched to touch. He had not anticipated Alonzo agreeing to his advances, not after the incident at the presidio, but the surprise had been a delight, each moment

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they shared in the darkness something to hold onto and treasure. He needed to etch each nuance into his memory, to be able to take it out later and relive when the house was empty again and Alonzo gone. But touching would risk waking the man, and Ben wasn't prepared to shatter the spell just yet.

When Alonzo rolled onto his back, he pulled the blanket with him and trapped it beneath his hip. The space gave Ben room to roll onto his side. This was a better vantage to view Alonzo's glorious body. For all his religious efforts, his muscles were hewn from the labor he didn't shirk, arms sinewy, shoulders broad. Dried flakes of their pleasure clung to his taut stomach. In their need, they had failed to wash up afterward. Ben smiled as he eased backward. He would remedy that now. It was happy coincidence that it would give him tangible reasons to touch Alonzo again.

He padded silently downstairs. The floorboards were cold beneath his feet, the fire low in the hearth. He poked at the embers, adding fresh kindling when sparks flew. When the flames regained enough height, he fetched a bowl of water from the storage room and warmed it over the heat.

Alonzo had not moved in the space of time Ben was downstairs. The blanket draped across his legs, outlining the line of his morning arousal. Ben's prick hardened at the simple sight. Though Alonzo had expressed his desire to continue their relationship, Ben knew he'd uttered the words in the dead of night. Circumstances always appeared much different with the coming day. He had to be ready for Alonzo to push him

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away at the slightest advance.

He desperately hoped that wouldn't be the case. No man had ever moved Ben like Alonzo did, both in form and in spirit. The last thing he wished was for the association to have to come to an end.

Kneeling at the side of the bed, Ben dipped a cloth into the water, preparing to wash Alonzo's skin. His prick poked free of both foreskin and blanket, the slit shiny. Ben swallowed. While Alonzo's hand had been glorious, a part of Ben craved to show him how else they could find relief. Already, he could feel the weight of that thick shaft against his tongue.

He leaned forward and inhaled the musky scent of Alonzo's skin in an attempt to offer some sort of satisfaction to his desires. All it did was make him want more.

Though his mouth watered, he forced himself to return to his original task. He squeezed the excess water from his rag, then carefully dabbed it across Alonzo's flat stomach. Alonzo twitched, but it wasn't enough to wake him up. The dried flakes washed off his skin easily, and Ben's cock throbbed with each swipe of the rag over Alonzo's body. He had thought nothing could be better than having Alonzo wash him, but now he realized he was mistaken.

He dipped the rag again, and returned to Alonzo's smooth body. Drops of water rolled down his side, darkening his skin, and creating perfect paths for Ben's mouth. It wasn't long before that impulse became too much to ignore, and he sighed with satisfaction as his lips touched Alonzo. He knew he had to savor every moment of contact between them.

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Muscles twitched beneath his tongue, alarming Ben enough to jerk away. Alonzo's eyes were still closed, but his breathing didn't seem as deep as it had been before. He was waking. They would have to face the day again very soon.

The water was cooling, but when Ben stood to fetch a new bowl, Alonzo shifted, his tongue darting out to moisten his lips. Such a simple gesture. Something he knew he did automatically every morning as well. On Alonzo, it was seduction itself.

"Good morning," he said when Alonzo blinked his eyes open.

"Good morning." Alonzo yawned and stretched. "Is it time to get up?"

"Only if you want to." Ben perched on the edge of the bed, unsure where he could put his hands. "How are you?"

"Fine. Good. I don't want to get out of this bed." Alonzo smiled sheepishly. "It's been far too long since I've slept in something this comfortable."

"So don't. It's early. You shouldn't strain your stomach anyway."

"How is it?" Alonzo splayed his fingers across his abdomen. "Bruised?"

"Yes." Ben traced along the lower curve of his ribcage. "Here. And here." He'd missed a patch of dried fluid on the far side. Bending over, he rinsed the rag one last time. "I don't think you've broken or cracked anything, though. You seem to be moving too well for that."

"It doesn't hurt like anything is broken. So that's

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something.” He fell into silence, watching as Ben washed the stain from him. “What are you doing?”

“We fell asleep last night before I could clean us up.” He felt almost shy meeting Alonzo’s eyes now. “I didn’t want you to be uncomfortable this morning.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” He reached for Ben’s fingers, holding his hand lightly. He caressed the back of Ben’s hand with his thumb. “Are you...are you going to lay down again?”

“I wanted...” His throat closed. It was too dry, too fearful of pushing this extra step. He’d already been given so much; was it greedy to want even more? With Alonzo’s dark eyes steady and sure on him, he found it more difficult to take the risk. He wished it was still dark. That would make all this easier. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “Whatever you wish.”

“I’m still not entirely sure what I wish. Honestly? A part of me thinks I should get up and get dressed right now. But another part...” Alonzo tightened his grip. “Still needs you.”

Ben allowed Alonzo to pull him forward, tossing the rag aside so both his hands were free. Alonzo’s breath hitched when the tip of Ben’s prick dragged a slick trail along his exposed skin, and his other hand came up to lightly grasp Ben’s hip. It positioned Ben directly above him, only the thin blanket separating their lower halves. A silent understanding passed between them in those frozen seconds, and then, slowly, with the return of the roaring of his blood in his ears, Ben lowered his head to kiss him.

Alonzo moaned as their mouths touched. It was a sound

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like acceptance, like need, like hunger. He opened to the kiss, inviting Ben to deepen the caress. More important than that, he invited Ben to continue. There was still a trace of hesitation in Alonzo's response, but it wasn't anything like the desperate and confused reaction from the night before. The hand on Ben's hip moved to his ass, holding him down.

Nothing had ever felt so good. Not the first touch of his hand along Alonzo's body the night before. Not the first word to come from Alonzo's mouth when he had found Ben hanging from the tree. Having this wonderful man open to him, want him, ask for more, enswathed him with glorious heat, and freed him from any more doubts of what they were doing. Ben had always known of his own preferences, but he understood it was different for a man of God. He'd denied himself the pleasure of the flesh his entire life. The Church condemned this deviancy. There were a multitude of reasons why Alonzo should ban him from ever touching him again, reasons Ben would respect even as he resented them.

But Alonzo did none of that. And the fact that he chose to focus on Ben instead only made his feelings for the man swell even more.

"Oh, Ben...Ben..." Each time they broke apart for air, Alonzo whispered his name. It didn't sound unlike the prayers Alonzo had heard him mutter a dozen times before. "I wondered if I dreamed everything last night."

"No, no dreams. This is real." He skimmed his mouth downward to suck at the pulse in Alonzo's neck. "All of it."

"I think I dreamt about it, too," Alonzo admitted, his

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fingers digging into Ben's flesh. "Good dreams. They made me want more. I don't know what you do to me."

"We'll figure it out together," Ben promised. Propping himself up on one hand, he reached between their bodies to push the blanket out of his way, curling his fingers around Alonzo's throbbing prick. "Though I already know what you do to me. I already know what more I'd like to share with you."

Alonzo sucked his breath in sharply. "What?"

"Do you trust me to show you?"

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Yes."

Delight sliced through him. Hiding his pleased smile, Ben slid down Alonzo's body, kissing over the smooth skin of his chest. He paused when he reached the closest nipple, remembering Alonzo's response the night before. The tip of his tongue traced the dark flesh, avoiding the hardening peak until Alonzo caught his breath and never let it out again. Anticipation bound them together. Ben gave Alonzo what he wanted by flicking across the puckered skin.

"Oh." Alonzo's back lifted off the bed, and Ben realized it probably didn't matter what he did. Alonzo was so sensitive, a mere breath of air across his skin would make him react. He lapped at Alonzo's nipple, gently teasing him by changing the pace and the pressure of the motion. When he used the flat of his tongue to rasp across the erect skin, Alonzo twisted his body, pushing against Ben's mouth and whimpering.

"This is only a taste," Ben murmured. Sliding farther down, he waited until Alonzo had settled back onto the bed

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before pressing his lips to the heated skin again. He took care to avoid the bruises. He wanted no pain associated with how he made Alonzo feel. His mouth followed the thin trail of dark hair that split his stomach, thickening the closer it got to his groin.

Alonzo's breath quickened with every inch. He clutched Ben's shoulder, and his fingertips dug into one of the welts. The raw sting would have stopped Ben under other circumstances, but now, he knew just how lost Alonzo was in this. He would never have hurt Ben otherwise.

When he reached the thick nest of curls, he took a deep breath, filling his head with the scent of Alonzo's skin and arousal. He looked up through his lashes, studying the other man's long body. He loved it. He loved Alonzo's broad shoulders. He loved the darker shade of skin on his face and the back of his hands. He loved that he could look, and Alonzo didn't do anything to push him away.

He lowered his head again and dragged his tongue over the coarse hair to the base of Alonzo's arousal. He put his lips together, kissing the smooth skin there. Alonzo's fingers curled into the sheet.

"This is what I dreamed of." His tongue circled the soft sac, coming back up to the shaft and sliding along its length. When he reached the tip, he gently cupped it in his free hand, tilting it away from Alonzo's body in order ease his tongue inside the foreskin and around the velvety head. His mouth prickled at the very first taste.

"Ben..." The word escaped in a rush of air. "I never..."

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That much was a given. But Ben had never tasted anybody like Alonzo. He had never felt anything as soft and rich as Alonzo's skin. His heart accelerated at the thought of finally swallowing Alonzo's length until his throat bulged with it. But before he did that, he knew he needed to give Alonzo time to adjust. So he pulled the foreskin back and gathered the clear fluid at the slit. He compared the texture on the underside to the texture at the tip, noting the tiny difference against his tongue. He tasted the skin over and over, until he had the salty flavor burned into his memory.

"Ben...I need more...something more..."

So did Ben, and now that he had the permission, he was going to take it.

He shifted his body, straddling one of Alonzo's strong legs to get a better angle. He skimmed his lips down the shaft, just to introduce the sensations to the man, then more slowly, mouthed a wetter, tighter path back up, groaning in unison with Alonzo when he reached the exposed head. His groan slid into a sigh when he closed his mouth over the tip, sealing his lips around the shaft. The first hard suck made his own prick throb. The second brought Alonzo's hand to the back of his head. The third finally gave him the weight along his tongue as he swallowed more of the thick length.

Alonzo didn't need encouragement to move. He thrust his hips, naturally seeking out more of the heat Ben offered, and Ben did nothing to discourage him. It was deeply satisfying to know how much he wanted Ben—and how much he wanted from Ben. His fingers twined in Ben's hair, holding him tight

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enough to make his scalp tingle. He didn't mind. Especially as he sank lower and lower, taking the full weight and length of Alonzo's erection.

Alonzo wasn't silent. He moaned continuously, vocalizing every stab of pleasure, every desire, every moment of hunger.

The only time they faltered was when Ben slipped his hand between Alonzo's thighs and cupped his sac. The contact against his roughened palm stifled any sound whatsoever, especially when his fingertips strayed over hot, sweaty skin farther down. He didn't blame Alonzo. It was a lot to take in all at once. And Ben wouldn't jeopardize their union by frightening him with something as intimate as that.

But his body made Ben ache, and it was impossible to stop touching him, especially when Alonzo didn't come out and tell him to. He swallowed more of the thick shaft to distract Alonzo, and when the tip nudged against the back of his hungry throat, Ben took a deep breath and took the rest of it in.

"Ben...oh..." Alonzo gasped. "Stop...please...stop..."

Though it killed him to do so, Ben slid back up the shaft, his lips lingering on the head before he turned his gaze upward. "Did I hurt you?" he rasped. "I didn't mean to."

"No...no you didn't hurt me. It's just...I just..." Alonzo released a shaky breath. "It was starting to feel like too much."

"But a good too much." Ben rubbed his cheek along Alonzo's prick, his eyes unwavering. "Like last night. That's the way it's supposed to feel."

Alonzo reached down to caress Ben's cheek. "I know. Does this feel good for you, too?"

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“More than good. I love the way you taste.”

“Okay. Okay, I think...I’m ready for more.”

Ben would have waited all day for Alonzo, but this was better. He didn’t hesitate this time when he took his prick past his lips, didn’t even pause when it filled his mouth. He took it all the way, burying his nose in the coarse hair and swallowing around the sensitive tip.

Alonzo jerked forward, pushing even farther into his throat. Ben moaned around his length, drawing an answering whimper from Alonzo’s throat. He cupped Alonzo’s balls, holding the sac lightly, flexing his fingers in time with each swallow.

“So amazing...Ben...you’re so amazing...”

His words, more than the slight tremors in his body or the small thrusts of his hips or even the weight of his prick against Ben’s tongue, lit the smoldering embers beneath Ben’s skin. No man had ever said such things to him before. No person other than his parents had ever said much of what Alonzo did, or made him feel this desirable and worthy. It invigorated his assault on Alonzo’s flesh, rolling his balls between nimble fingers, humming around the shaft. He swallowed every drop of fluid that seeped from the slit, hungry for the explosion he knew was about to come.

“I’m...I’m...” Alonzo couldn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t need to. His entire body made the message clear. He bent his leg and braced his foot against the bed, pushing deeper into Ben’s throat. His balls tightened against Ben’s palm, and the vein pulsed against Ben’s tongue. His breath

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came in faster and faster gasps. Then Alonzo's warmth flooded Ben's mouth and throat, thick and salty.

Ben swallowed as fast as he could, unwilling to lose a single drop. He stayed down as long as he could, until his lungs burned from the lack of air, but even then, he only slid far enough up the softening length to catch his breath. He didn't want to lose this connection, even though he ached to be touched.

"Ben...I'm too sensitive." Alonzo gently pushed at his shoulder. "Please."

Reluctantly, Ben pulled off, sliding up to seal his mouth to Alonzo's. Alonzo opened immediately, satisfied moans coming from the back of his throat. Each one sent another frisson of desire shimmering along every knob of Ben's spine.

"You're still hard..." Alonzo's fingers brushed across Ben's arousal. "Can I...ask something?" At Ben's nod, Alonzo smiled, almost shyly. "I want to watch you touch yourself. I want to see you finish."

He was on the verge of reminding Alonzo that he'd done the same thing the night before, but then chided himself for such foolishness and losing this opportunity. Sitting back on his heels, he grasped his erection, half-smiling when Alonzo moistened his lips and stared. He would have preferred Alonzo's hand, but the familiarity of his grip was more than enough, the smooth strokes he knew it would take for his release. His head fell back, and his eyes closed as he let his need take over. Already, his thighs quivered. One pull of his balls, the image of Alonzo on his knees with his mouth open

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and hungry burned on his imagination, and Ben shattered.

His prick jerked in his hand, the first eruption landing on Alonzo's stomach. The others followed, but Ben was only vaguely aware of their trajectory. He was too lost in the heat crawling over his skin, the rising scent of their desire filling his nose, the way Alonzo gripped his thigh and massaged the shaking muscle. Alonzo was the one who kept him from toppling forward. And it was Alonzo he focused on when the last of the tension dissipated from his body.

"I get to wash you again, it looks like," he said with a sleepy smile.

"Yes. But not yet." Alonzo pulled him forward, until their mouths were less than inch apart. "Why can't I get enough of these lips?"

"Because you've had to wait so long for kisses." The one Ben gave him now was simple, almost chaste, though it lingered longer than anyone would ever deem possible. "You've been starved your entire life. If I'm lucky, you won't get your fill for a long time."

"I don't know if I'll ever have my fill." Alonzo smiled, but there was a touch of sadness in his eyes. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"About what?"

"About you. About this. About me. I never suspected anything could feel like this, Ben. It changes...everything."

Ben rolled to the side. Some of his euphoria faded in fear of what Alonzo might have to say next. "What does it change?" he asked carefully.

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“I already told you everything.” Alonzo settled on his side, facing Ben more fully. “Ben...there has only ever been one thing in my life that inspired complete devotion. Only one thing in my life that mattered.”

God. Ben knew without being told that’s what Alonzo meant. “But you still have Him. He’s not going to abandon you because I’ve led you astray.”

“I know He will never abandon me. But I just meant...” Alonzo tilted his head, his brow nearly touching Ben’s. “Now there are two things that matter to me. And that’s why everything is different.”

His heart thundered at the confession. Could Alonzo hear it? Did it matter if he could? The hand he rested on Alonzo’s hip shook, and he had to swallow more than once to regain control of his voice.

“You don’t have to worry about finding answers now on what you’re going to do, Alonzo. I don’t know if you even have to do anything.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should wait to think about it...” He rested his hand on Ben’s thigh. “Until I’m thinking clearly.”

Ben smiled. “Then now is definitely not the time to look for those kind of answers. In case you haven’t figured it out, after you’ve spent yourself, everything kind of stops working for a while.”

“I’ve noticed.” He collapsed back to the bed and took a deep breath. “When do things start working again?”

“Probably not as long as you think.” His muscles rebelled,

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but Ben rolled off the bed and went around the end in order to retrieve the water and rag. “You just lie there and rest while I clean you off. And if you need to sleep, do so. It’s early. We have all day.”

“If I fall asleep, I fear I’ll only dream of you again.”

“But if you stay awake, you’ll have me in the flesh. So it doesn’t really matter which you choose, does it?”

“Oh, it matters.” Alonzo yawned. “Will I have you in the flesh when I wake?”

Ben kept his touch gentle, swabbing away the fluid. “You’ll have me for as long as you wish.” And even longer after that, Ben silently vowed.

CHAPTER 8

When Ben wasn't in immediate touching distance, Alonzo lapsed into thoughtful, almost brooding, silence. Every second they spent together, Alonzo was entirely focused on Ben. On every aspect and detail that made Ben who he was—physical, mental, and emotional. There wasn't anything he didn't like about the other man, and he luxuriated in the freedom to express his fondness. But as soon as Ben separated from him, there were a million other considerations crowding his mind.

That was actually one other consideration.

They passed three days touching and reading, talking and eating, cuddling and sleeping. To Alonzo, it felt like they had spent the full seventy-two hours making love. Every touch

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was actually a caress. Every word an endearment. But Alonzo didn't pretend things could continue like that indefinitely. Though he had left enough food and water for the animals to be comfortable for a couple days, he needed to return to his presidio and duties soon. They both knew it was only a matter of time before Cullen arrived, seeking his men and preparing to stake his claim to a home that didn't belong to him. Alonzo had the feeling that would be yet another meeting that would end in bloodshed. He didn't even try to discuss it with Ben, though. He had told Ben that he believed a person had the right to defend their home and their person, and he didn't want Ben to think he had been lying about that.

Alonzo didn't pray once in Ben's house. He was ashamed of himself. Ashamed because he should have begged for forgiveness. But he couldn't offer penance when he wasn't sorry. Repentance required a promise not to commit the sin again, and as long as he was near Ben, he couldn't make that promise. When several miles separated the two of them, would it be easier to remember his place and his relationship with God?

Would it be possible to write the days off as nothing more than brief madness?

Every time that thought snuck up on him, he would look at Ben's soft eyes and be forced to dismiss the notion. He couldn't dismiss his feelings for Ben as madness. Unfortunately, he didn't know how to categorize them at all.

The morning of the fourth day, he knew things were different. For the first time since arriving, he didn't wake up

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with Ben at his side. His clothes were folded carefully on the chair near the bed, and the door stood ajar, evidence of Ben's earlier rising. Alonzo dressed quickly and went downstairs, straining for any sign of Ben. He found him in the kitchen, cracking eggs into a pan on the small woodstove.

"You're up," Ben said, flashing a smile over his shoulder. "I knew I took too long watering the animals."

"I missed you." Alonzo kissed the corner of Ben's mouth, but pulled away before he was tempted to explore his mouth. "You make me feel like a lazybones."

"I wanted to make you a good breakfast before your trip back to the presidio. It was supposed to be served in bed, but seeing as you're up now..." He nodded to the covered dishes sitting on the table. Now that Alonzo wasn't focused on Ben, he noticed the other scents in the air—hearty ham, rich coffee, and something sweet he couldn't put a finger on. "Might as well set the table."

"I'll do that." Alonzo moved around the kitchen easily, like it belonged to him. It was strange how easily he fit in Ben's life and home. Or maybe not so strange, because Ben went out of his way to show him that he wanted Alonzo there. "Are you going to accompany me back to the presidio?"

"I would like to." The whites splattered in the hot grease. Ben poked the edges with a fork, moving them around in the pan. "But I'm not sure it's a good idea. Not until I get this matter resolved with Cullen."

"Oh." He knew his disappointment was obvious in his voice, so he forced himself to smile. "You're right. It would

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be dangerous to leave the homestead right now.”

“Better you’re not seen with me just yet, either. Cullen doesn’t need to know of our friendship. He’ll use it, and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

Chances were good that nobody would see them traveling together, but he appreciated Ben’s caution. Even if it was a little misplaced, in his view.

“So I suppose I should avoid visiting you until the issue is resolved, as well.”

“It might not be as long as you think.” He took the pan off the flame and brought it over to the table, tipping the eggs onto the waiting plates. “I’ve been thinking about what I can do.”

“Have you decided anything?” Alonzo asked, careful to keep his voice neutral.

“Yes.” He studiously avoided Alonzo’s gaze. “I’d like to sign the land over to you.”

“What?”

Ben took the pan over to the washtub. “I’d like to sign the land over to you. Cullen thinks I’m an easy target because I’m mixed blood. If the land belonged to you, he would think twice about taking it.”

“Ben...that isn’t right. If you sign the land over to me, you won’t be able to pass it to your heirs.” The very word pained him. He didn’t want to think about Ben finding a woman and begetting sons. But he wouldn’t shy away from their reality. “I mean, it’s your father’s land. I have no right to it.”

“Neither does Cullen. That’s not stopping him from trying

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to take it anyway.”

“If you sign it over to me, you are, in effect, signing it over to the Church,” Alonzo reminded him softly.

“Would you force me to leave it?”

“No. Never. I just wanted to be sure that you understood.”

Ben remained silent as he returned to the table and took the seat next to Alonzo’s. “I’ve been thinking about this for a couple days now. My one fear is that if I do this, Cullen will come after you instead.”

“Let him try. I don’t fear him, and I will never let him take what is rightfully yours.”

“That would make this your home.” Ben’s soft smile came with his hand reaching between them to cover Alonzo’s. “You wouldn’t have to find excuses to stay here. Or to come see me when you’re not busy with your flock.”

“My flock.” The words sounded odd to him and tasted even stranger. He desperately wanted to continue serving the people in the area, but he knew he was not worthy of that task. The thought made him ill. “Do you think I still have one?”

“Of course. You’re the best man I’ve ever known.” The smile faltered. “Unless you consider yourself tainted because of our time together.”

“I don’t know.” It may not have been the answer Ben wanted to hear, but he never lied to his lover. “Can I still perform all my duties knowing that I have broken my solemn vows? Would you trust the sort of man who would break a promise?”

“I would trust you.” Ben picked up his fork and turned to

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his food, his eyes hidden from view. “But I guess my soul isn’t one you have to worry about.”

“It is,” Alonzo countered. “Maybe the only one I do worry about.” He took a deep breath. “But I’ll do my best by them. Just because I might have detoured from the path doesn’t mean others should draw away from God.”

“So...you would let me do this? If not, I’ll find other means to keep the land safe from Cullen. It was just...this seemed to be the best way to give us both what we want.”

“Of course, I’ll let you do this. We’ll probably have to go to San Antonio to complete the proper paperwork, but once we do, Cullen will not be able to touch you.”

The agreement seemed to finally be enough to relax Ben, softening the lines around his mouth as he dug into his breakfast. Beneath the table, his bare foot slipped forward to nudge against Alonzo’s.

“I’ll miss you when you go,” he admitted. “I’ve grown used to having someone else around.”

“I don’t have to be gone for very long. There’s no reason we can’t go to San Antonio as soon as possible.” The corner of Alonzo’s mouth lifted. “And there’s nobody waiting for me at the presidio.”

Ben matched his smile. “Once Cullen isn’t bothering me anymore, it’ll be easier to come and see you there, too. Someone has to help you with your gardening, after all.”

“I don’t know. Once I own the land, you’ll be working for me. I might not allow you take any time off.”

“You only say that because you like my bed better than

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your own.”

Alonzo grinned. “I guess that’ll be my bed now. I’m really starting to like this idea.”

“As long as I get to sleep in it, too, I don’t care who claims it.” His eyes grew wistful, lingering on Alonzo before he resumed eating. “I think my parents would have liked you. It’s a shame you never had the chance to meet them.”

“I wish I could have known them.”

Though he knew plenty about them, and not just because of what Ben told him. Their ghosts survived within the walls of the house they built together. Reminders great and small of who they must have been, what they believed, what they were good at. He had wondered more than once what they would say if they could see Alonzo in their home, in the room they had once shared, holding their son like he was afraid to let him go.

Alonzo had a hard time getting through his breakfast. He didn’t want to eat it. Once he finished the food, he would have no choice but to collect his cassock and canteen and head back to the presidio. He might have justified staying, but he had animals to see to, a garden to tend, a hundred little chores that needed his attention. Despite the fact that they were both doing their best to prolong the meal, eventually the plates were cleared.

“Thanks for the breakfast,” Alonzo said softly.

Though he nodded in acknowledgement, Ben didn’t look up from the water he poured over the dirty dishes. Alonzo held his breath, wondering what came next, wishing desperately he

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didn't have to turn around and see through the final motions of leaving. Part of him wanted Ben to forbid him to go. Part of him wanted to beg to stay.

Without a word, Ben reached for his wrist. He turned into Alonzo, his head still bowed, and wrapped an arm around Alonzo's shoulders. His lips pressed to the side of Alonzo's neck, firm, dry, a reminder of every other time he had kissed that particular spot.

"Thank you for everything," he whispered.

"You're more than welcome." He automatically wrapped his arms around Ben and held him closer. More and more, it seemed like all of his reactions to Ben were automatic. Natural. Like he had been built for Ben. Which was ridiculous, because the Father would never make something like this natural. Would He?

More and more, Alonzo realized he didn't know.

"I feel like I should be thanking you," he added, his lips moving against Ben's temple.

Ben shook his head, then broke the contact, leaving Alonzo cold and aching at the loss. He still couldn't quite meet Alonzo's eyes as he retreated for the doorway.

"I have to see to the livestock. I'll be out by the barn when you leave."

Alonzo would have joined Ben in the barn, or waited for him in the house, but his second statement made it clear that Ben didn't expect him to do either. Which was probably for the best. He didn't need to think of any more excuses to dawdle in the house. But it was beyond tempting to follow his

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lover out to the barn, seeking out one more kiss, one caress, one more embrace.

Instead, he collected his few belongings and let himself out the front door. He found a horse tied to the hitching post there and recognized it as belonging to one of Cullen's men. Smiling at Ben's thoughtfulness, he swung himself into the saddle. Riding would certainly reduce the time he spent in the relentless sun.

In spite of the early hour, sweat dripped down the back of his collar long before he reached the tributary that would guide him back to the presidio. A haze crawled along the horizon, heralding temperatures higher than the norm. The trip would have been interminable if he'd had to walk. Alonzo silently thanked God the horse needed no encouragement to keep a swift pace.

Hooves pounded off to his right, and with his heart suddenly racing in excitement, Alonzo turned and squinted against the sun to make out the approaching horse. His hope that it was Ben faded, however, when he saw the familiar bulk on the back of the appaloosa everybody recognized.

Sheriff Cullen slowed as he neared. He was not a small man, barrel-chested and grizzled from his years in the territory. Hands the size of small hams held the reins loosely in front of him, and watery eyes frowned at Alonzo, even from that distance.

"You're a long way from your presidio, Father."

Alonzo didn't slow. "Yes. You're a long way from your town."

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Cullen angled his horse to block Alonzo's path. "Care to tell me what you're doing on a horse that don't belong to you?"

"I found this horse wandering in the wilderness. It seemed a shame to leave the poor animal to die."

Cullen glanced behind him, but only for a moment. "Finders don't make keepers, Father. I know the man who owns that animal. I suggest you get down from there so I can get it back to him."

Alonzo felt his bile rising. "Where is he? Or is he the sort of man who would let his own horse wander away?"

The pale eyes turned to flint. At the edge of Cullen's beard, a muscle twitched. "Maybe I didn't make myself clear, Father. Get down from there. I won't ask you again."

Alonzo straightened in his saddle. He knew it would be smart not to provoke the other man, but he was not going to let Cullen push him around. "You've made yourself clear, Sheriff. But you haven't presented any evidence that this horse belongs to who you claim it does."

"But I do know it don't belong to you." Without looking away, he drew his gun and aimed it at Alonzo. "I've had a pisser of a week. Killing you would be the first thing to go right."

Alonzo put his hands up slowly and swung his leg over the horse. Without taking his gaze from Cullen, he slid off the saddle and landed on the ground. "I've heard a little bit about your week. Do you have anything you'd like to confess, my son?"

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Cullen turned mean faster than anyone Alonzo had ever known. The changes weren't great—a narrowing of his already small eyes, a flare of a wide nostril, even a slight curl in his thin upper lip—but they had felled lesser men without the sheriff having to lift a finger. Alonzo's query was met with an almost inaudible snarl.

"You've been at the McKinnon place."

"Well, actually, it's my place now. And should anything happen to me, it'll become property of the Roman Catholic Church."

Cullen jerked in his saddle, the gun wavering for the first time. "What the hell do you mean, it's your place?"

"Ben McKinnon willed it to me." Alonzo licked his lips. "On his deathbed."

A bead of sweat rolled between his shoulder blades while he waited for Cullen to speak. It didn't surprise him in the least when the sheriff said bluntly, "You're lying."

If Cullen truly believed that, nothing would stop him from shooting Alonzo. And once he shot Alonzo, nothing would stop him from riding directly to Ben's and either arresting him for murder, or killing him outright. So he had no real choice at all.

"No, I am not lying. I swear on the Virgin."

The sheriff didn't blink. His finger remained on the trigger, ready at a moment's notice to shoot, but indecision clearly warred in his furious eyes.

"Wills require witnesses. You can't just say he gave it to you."

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“I have a better claim to the land than you do.”

“Only if you live long enough to tell someone.”

The roar of a gun made Alonzo’s ears ring, and though he threw himself to the ground, he knew almost immediately it hadn’t come from Cullen’s gun. Through the horse’s legs, he saw another galloping closer. The long legs of its rider could only belong to one man.

Cullen’s features distorted with his anger, and he swung his gun around to take aim at Ben. Alonzo shouted in warning, his heart in his throat. He didn’t know if Ben heard him. He didn’t know if it made a difference. He only knew both guns went off again, nearly simultaneously.

Alonzo pushed himself to his feet, barely noting Cullen’s prone position as he rushed to Ben. He sank to his knees at Ben’s side, reaching for his shoulder to roll him onto his back. It couldn’t have taken more than three or four seconds, but time didn’t just slow to a crawl. It stopped completely. In those endless moments, Alonzo understood what life would be like without Ben.

Pointless. Empty.

“Ben. Ben?”

Ben’s groan was the single best sound he had ever heard.

Lifting a hand to his head, Ben grimaced as he blinked his eyes open. Blood oozed from a scrape on his cheek, and there was a hole in his sleeve where Cullen’s bullet had grazed him. But he sat up with little help and craned his head to squint off in the distance.

“Tell me I got the bastard,” he rasped.

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Alonzo looked over his shoulder. Cullen wasn't moving. "You got him. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." The answer came quickly; Alonzo knew he'd said it without even considering how he might be injured. "He didn't hurt you, did he? I saw him aiming at you, and I didn't think. I just pulled the trigger and hoped I was faster."

"He didn't hurt me," Alonzo assured him, gently wiping the blood from Ben's cheek. There was a tremor in his voice that he couldn't suppress. "You got here in time."

Color slowly crept up Ben's neck. "I didn't like the thought of you going back to the presidio all by yourself." He ran his tongue over his dry lower lip. "I was just trying to catch up and ask if I could come with you."

"I don't like the thought of going back to the presidio at all." Alonzo slid his arm beneath Ben's shoulders and helped him stand up. "I should take you home and take care of your arm."

"It's just a scratch."

"Humor me." He knew logically it was just a scratch, but his earlier fear still coursed through his veins. He needed to take care of Ben. He needed to make sure that he truly was unharmed. "Please."

The solemn eyes that met his seemed unsure, though every moment they remained steady was another Alonzo could thank God for sparing him any more torment. "I can't," Ben said. "I've only made things worse for us now. You can't be seen with me."

"What are you talking about?"

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“If Cullen isn’t dead already, he’s going to get me locked away for good for trying to do it. And if he *is* dead...” Ben’s gaze strayed past Alonzo’s shoulder to the man lying in the dust behind them. When he swayed slightly, Alonzo tightened his hold around his waist. “This isn’t the same as defending my land. You can’t be associated with this.”

“Ben...you’re not thinking clearly. For one thing, you shot him because you were saving my life. Everybody in town knows how much Cullen hates me. Nobody would doubt that you were acting in my defense. But that doesn’t matter. Because there’s nobody and nothing to link you to his death.”

Ben’s head snapped back to stare at Alonzo. “There’s you. And this will tie you to me publicly, even more than signing over my land. Is that really what you want?”

“I am not going to tell anybody what happened here. Justice won’t be served that way.”

“You will still know. Does this change anything?”

“Does it change anything about the way I feel for you? You saved my life, Ben. How could it change anything?”

“Because I would do it again, to ensure you’re safe. And I don’t know if you can respect a man who would kill like that. Or even if you should.”

“You’ve already killed,” Alonzo reminded him gently. He wiped away more blood and dust from Ben’s cheek. “I’ve seen what you’re capable of in defense of something you cherish. And I respect you for your courage.”

Surprise and awe gleamed in his dark eyes before he glanced back again at the horses. “I don’t know what I ever

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did to have you in my life. But I'll be grateful until my dying day for the privilege of it."

Alonzo had violated his sacred vows, sworn a sacrilegious oath, helped bury four men, and would do everything in his power to cover up a fifth murder. The life he had lived in relative peace and happiness was forever gone, and the black print of sin marred his soul. He understood that in order to save himself, he needed to ride away from Ben. He could be forgiven if he did that.

But he didn't have the strength to live with the empty space that would carve into his heart. Other men did, and Alonzo supposed he admired them for that. But those other men had never known Ben McKinnon, either. Instead of releasing Ben, he tilted his head and found his lips in a gentle, slow kiss. The sun was at his back, heating him through his coat, and a breeze picked up, sand and dust swirling around them. Ben's lips seemed to be warmer than the sun.

"I'll take care of Cullen," Alonzo promised. "And I'll come back tonight."

Ben shook his head. "We should do it together." The fingers of his free hand found Alonzo's, entwining them until it became impossible to know which belonged to which man. A smile slanted his soft mouth, extending all the way to his shining gaze. "And then we'll both go home. The presidio or the house, it doesn't matter."

It didn't matter to Alonzo, either, as long as neither one of them would be alone. They had both spent too much time with nothing but their own company. He would go into San Elizario

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in a few days and help the town transition to a new sheriff. One that would not bully the citizens, steal their property, and silence them with bullets.

“That sounds like a good plan to me. Come on.”

When he tried to lead Ben toward the body on the ground, though, he was forced to a stop, pulled back against the other man’s chest, and enveloped in an embrace that stole his very breath. Ben clung to him with strength Alonzo had known he possessed but rarely experienced. It was like the last hug Ben had given in his kitchen, except more encompassing. His mouth moved against Alonzo’s neck, seductive and slow, and it took several seconds for him to realize Ben was speaking.

“...know this one thing. All that I cherish is you.”

Alonzo swallowed hard. Then swallowed again. No matter what he did, he couldn’t clear the sudden block in his throat. “And I you,” he finally whispered, knowing that Ben would hear the words over the wind, the river behind them, the horses neighing and stomping their hoofs. “And I you.”

JAMIE CRAIG

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

* * *

**Don't miss *Stealing Winter*, by Jamie Craig,
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Leon Stroud is wanted for robbery and a murder he didn't commit. On the run to California with his partner-in-crime, Kenneth, he spots the relentless bounty hunter, Thomas Grady, on the train. The only way to protect Kenneth is to create a distraction, and that's what Leon does when he flees the train at the top of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. He forces Thomas to chase him, but nothing can prepare him for what it means to be caught.

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